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Withering into the truth : a study of the novels of Nadine Gordimer.

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WITHERING INTO THE TRUTH:
A STUDY OF THE NOVELS
OF NADINE GORDIMER

by
Alan R. Lomborg

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
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PREFACE

In a portrait of Nadine Gordimer written for the Saturday Review ten years ago, John Barkham referred to her as "South Africa's undisputed First Lady of Letters."¹ The same title has been accorded her by many others, and the reservation implicit in it is not so much a matter of male chauvinism as a mark of deference to Alan Paton. Professor Edward Callan, introducing Ms Gordimer and Mr Paton at the Conference on South African Writing held in Johannesburg in 1969, referred to them as "the two pre-eminent South African writers,"² and few would dispute that judgement.

Professor Callan has produced a critical volume on Alan Paton's work, but there has been, to my knowledge, no such assessment of Nadine Gordimer, and certainly none of her work as a novelist,³ despite the fact that she has now published five novels which have won increasing critical acclaim, culminating in her receipt of the James Tait Black Memorial Award for fiction in 1971 - an honour she shares with a distinguished list of writers that includes D. H.

¹ John Barkham, "South Africa: Perplexities, Brutalities, Absurdities," Saturday Review (January 12, 1963), 63.

² Edward Callan, "The Art of Nadine Gordimer and Alan Paton," English Studies in Africa (January 13, 1970), 291.

³ There have, in fact, been a small number of theses on Ms Gordimer's work, but most of these were written at least ten years ago. The only recent one - Dorothy Ledbetter, San Diego State College, 1969 - was on her short stories.

Lawrence, E. M. Forster, Robert Graves and Graham Greene.

The intent of this thesis is to analyse Ms Gordimer's work as a novelist, and to attempt an assessment of her achievement to date. If it is not true, as a critic for The Christian Science Monitor suggested, that "she is probably the most sensitive writer in our language today,"⁴ it is certainly true that she is a writer of great intellectual integrity and moral responsibility, whose novels make a plea for life against the forces which restrict it and which, anywhere, can warp human relationships and impoverish life itself. In her first four, "South African," novels she has provided the fullest picture in literature of the stifling effects of racialist policy on that society over the past twenty years; effects which are the product of fear, oppression and terror which are not, of course, limited to South Africa. Her fifth novel, A Guest of Honour, treats themes common to her South African novels, but in the context of a newly-independent African state. The range and depth of its analysis of the problems of such states, and the epic proportions of the novel, make it the only work of its kind to have come out of Africa, and therefore a major contribution to the African novel.

⁴ Arnold Beichman, "Responsibility can have no end," The Christian Science Monitor (June 30, 1966), 13.

CHAPTER 1

LIFE AND WORKS

Nadine Gordimer was born on November 20th, 1923 in Springs, a mining town on the mineral-rich South African reef. Educated privately, at a convent school, and later at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, she has always lived in South Africa, and most of her writing has had the country, and particularly the world of Johannesburg, as its setting. Her marriage to G. Gavron in 1949 was short-lived, and in 1954 she married Reinhold Cassirer, a member of the distinguished European intellectual family of the same name.

Bar about nine years (by her own account),¹ Nadine Gordimer has been writing all her life, and had her first story printed in a liberal South African publication before she was sixteen. She has since published five volumes of short stories and five novels. The Soft Voice of the Serpent (1952), her first book published abroad, contained much the same stories as Face to Face, which appeared in South Africa in 1949. It was followed by The Lying Days (1953), her first novel, also published abroad, as all her subsequent books were to be. The appearance of her second collection of short stories, Six Feet of the Country (1956), set a pattern of alternating volumes of short stories and novels, which persisted till the

¹Nadine Gordimer, "Leaving School - II," The London Magazine (May, 1963), 60.

publication of her fifth novel. A World of Strangers (1958) followed, and showed Ms Gordimer both developing and altering the style and techniques of her first novel. Her collection of short stories, Friday's Footprint (1960) won the W. H. Smith Award for 1961. Her next novel Occasion for Loving (1963) marked a significant departure in her writing, displaying a more allusive style than had appeared in her first two novels. The volume of short stories, Not for Publication (1965) was followed by her shortest and most compact novel, The Late Bourgeois World (1966) which, like A World of Strangers, was banned in South Africa; a ban that was subsequently lifted, but reimposed on all paperback editions. Her most substantial work, A Guest of Honour (1970) was set, unlike the first four, outside of South Africa, in an unnamed East African country. Her last collection of stories, Livingstone's Companions, was published in 1971.

In addition to her short stories and novels, Nadine Gordimer has been a frequent contributor of book reviews, travel articles, and reports on the South African situation to leading journals in Britain and America. Her short stories have appeared in more than a dozen anthologies,² and she has also lectured on African and South African writing at many universities, chiefly in the United States - including such prominent institutions as Harvard, Princeton, Radcliffe (where she was also writer-in-residence) and Columbia, where

² Including, Stories from the New Yorker (1960), Encounters (a selection of the best work from the first ten years of Encounter), Penguin Modern Stories No 4, and English Literature from 1940.

she was an adjunct professor in the writing programme. She is co-editor of the Penguin anthology, South African Writing Today,³ and helped to launch the work of a young African poet from South Africa, Oswald Mtshali, by contributing an introduction to his first volume of poetry.⁴

The subject matter of her writing has, over the years, been drawn increasingly from places outside of South Africa - Britain, the United States, and independent African countries - but most of it has focused on South Africa, and her first four novels demonstrate what she herself has said, that the racial situation in South Africa has been a major influence on her writing.⁵

Her first novel, The Lying Days,⁶ dealt with the growth of its Scots-descended narrator, Helen Shaw, from early adolescence to early womanhood. The novel displayed the same exceptional sensitivity that reviewers had remarked upon in Ms Gordimer's short stories, and established certain themes to which she was to return in her later novels. Broadly, these are the wish to live fully, the importance of workaday life with its private problems and personal relationships, the notion of growth as rebellion, the importance of love,

3 South African Writing Today, ed. Nadine Gordimer and Lionel Abrahams (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1967).

4 Oswald Mtshali, Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (Johannesburg, 1971).

5 Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa," a formalised dialogue by Alan Ross of conversations with Nadine Gordimer, The London Magazine (May, 1965), 23.

6 Nadine Gordimer, The Lying Days (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1953). All future references are to this edition.

and the necessity of extracting the truth from one's experience of life. Treating the heroine's life in stages, governed largely by personal relationships in which she moved from the first stirrings of love, through an introduction to the world of culture and ideas, to a final relationship which combined physical and emotional love, ideas, and increasing political and social awareness, the novel displayed a hope which was to be steadily eroded in the subsequent novels, and established a general pattern for all the novels of a process of "wither[ing] into the truth."⁷

Reviewing The Lying Days for the New Statesman and Nation, Walter Allen felt that it was the best novel of its milieu "for a very long time", and to read it was:

to grow up in South Africa at the present day in the company of a very distinguished mind eager for experience but resolute to separate the false from the true.⁸

Every review was not as laudatory, and more than one complained of inadequate characterisation and plot. Almost all, though, spoke admiringly of the novelist's sensitivity of perception in tracing the growth of Helen Shaw towards understanding of herself, the society in which she lived, and the racist policies affecting that society. Alison Blair, in Encounter, praised as well the "astonishing authenticity" with which the

⁷ From the poem by W. B. Yeats which is the epigraph to The Lying Days.

⁸ Walter Allan, "New Novels," The New Statesman and Nation (October 24, 1953), 498.

"crudely materialistic" world of Johannesburg was recreated,⁹ and this ability of Nadine Gordimer's - for vivid and credible evocation of setting and atmosphere - is another distinctive feature of her writing.

Of Ms Gordimer's second novel, A World of Strangers,¹⁰ Francis Wyndham, said, in London Magazine, that:

The high quality of the writing, the psychological perception and the finely judged descriptive passages, present the urgent but hackneyed theme with a fresh force; this is both a novel with a message and a work of art.¹¹

A number of other reviewers, perhaps expecting the novel to be indisputably a "political novel" seemed to miss the "message" and to misjudge the novel, as I believe Marghanita Laski did in Saturday Review.¹² A World of Strangers placed the Oxbridge-educated Toby Hood, sent to South Africa as a representative of his family's publishing firm, Aden Parrot, in the same Johannesburg in which Helen Shaw had spent her final years of "growing up". Toby, however, gets to know a different Johannesburg: the luxurious comfort of "The High House", where the white upper-middle class drink, eat, ride and swim; and, at the other end, the world of the African Locations, where drinks are taken in bare shanty rooms with

77. 9 Alison Blair, "Five Novels," Encounter (January, 1954),

10 Nadine Gordimer, A World of Strangers (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books Ltd., 1962). All future references are to this edition.

11 Francis Wyndham, The London Magazine (July, 1958), 72.

12 Marghanita Laski, "Community of the Uncommitted," Saturday Review (September 13, 1958), 41.

one ear constantly on the alert for the police. Attempting to maintain contact with both these worlds and "to take care of [his] relationships with men and women who come into [his] life" without having to bother with the "abstractions of race and politics",¹³ he finds, in the end, that there are "two camps", with mutually exclusive allegiances, and that he is forced to choose between them.¹⁴ The novel confirms Ms Gordimer's concern for private everyday life, the importance of personal relationships, and the encroachment of social pressures seeking to channel that life, and restrict those relationships.

Occasion for Loving¹⁵ shows racist politics moving even more into command as its various manifestations help to end the love affair between a white married woman, Ann Davis, and an African painter, Gideon Shibalo. Set against this love affair, which is forced to make itself less and less public, are the private musings of Jessie Stilwell, in whose house Ann and her musicologist husband, Boaz, are staying. The disintegration of the love affair, with Ann's return to her husband, and their sudden departure from the country, forces Jessie and her husband Tom to face the unpleasant fact that their belief in "the integrity of personal relations against

¹³ A World of Strangers, p. 36.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 263.

¹⁵ Nadine Gordimer, Occasion for Loving (New York, The Viking Press, 1963). All future references are to this edition.

the distortion of laws and society" is untenable; and that "white privilege", entrenched by the "law", would eventually make "blackness count" even "between lovers".¹⁶

Through the Ann Davis-Gideon Shibalo relationship Ms Gordimer continued her pursuit of the effects of racial policy on life; through Jessie Stilwell she develops the idea of the "inner" life; Helen Shaw's notion of change in life coming about as "a long, slow mutation of emotion"¹⁷ is developed into Jessie Stilwell's idea of "the true graph of experience"¹⁸ - a charting of the personal and individual life by means of inner fears, questings, discoveries which are of major importance in the determination of the true quality of a person's life, and which cannot be described by the exterior series of events that an outsider might fix on to draw the "graph" of life.

Alan Ross, in London Magazine, praised particularly Ms Gordimer's treatment of Jessie, claiming that when she is the narrator "the writing acquires a persuasive magic that illuminates everything it touches".¹⁹ The New Statesman reviewer felt that:

the real force of the book, a force as much moral as technical, comes from the passionate contrast between Jessie and Ann - utterly different kinds

¹⁶ Occasion for Loving, p. 296.

¹⁷ The Lying Days, p. 222.

¹⁸ Occasion for Loving, p. 21.

¹⁹ Alan Ross, "Special Notices," The London Magazine, (July, 1963), 90.

of women, yet neither grudged anything by the author,

and he considered the novel "a triumph, written with great clarity, sweetness and wit."²⁰

In The Late Bourgeois World,²¹ which the reviewer for The Times Literary Supplement thought was "probably her finest (novel) yet",²² and which moved the critic for the Christian Science Monitor to say, "she is probably the most sensitive writer in our language today", Nadine Gordimer strips plot to its bare minimum, and reduces the time of the novel's action to a single day. At the beginning of that day, Liz van den Sandt is having breakfast with her lover, Graham Mill, a lawyer who has distinguished himself as a defender of political criminals. At the end of it, she has just finished a long evening with Luke Fokase, an African revolutionary, through whom she feels she is about to become drawn again into political action which she had forsaken, apparently many years before. Between those two events there has been a visit to her son, Bobo, at his private boy's school, and to her grandmother in a nursing home. Yet the major part of the novel has little to do with these incidents of the day, and is taken up by the telling and retelling of the story of Liz's life with Max, her former husband. This

²⁰ "Silver Spoon," New Statesman (March 15, 1963), 392.

²¹ Nadine Gordimer, The Late Bourgeois World (New York, The Viking Press, 1966). All future references are to this edition.

²² "On the Brink," The Times Literary Supplement (July 7, 1966), 589.

"inner" story is set in motion by the telegramme which had come during breakfast, announcing that Max had committed suicide by driving his car into the sea at Cape Town. A thousand miles away, in Johannesburg, Liz relives their life together, with its political involvement, the increasing frustration and desperation of Max's actions, up to his arrest on a bomb-planting charge, and his betrayal of his associates by turning state's witness. In the process of narrating this, Liz, as she might have done in a Browning dramatic monologue, unwittingly reveals herself as well as Max.

The most important aspect of the novel is its demonstration of the extent to which life in South Africa has become constricted, distorted and impoverished. The Times Literary Supplement reviewer²³ captured very well the stress as well as the quality of perception of the novel when he remarked:

Despite its background of the horror of life under an oppressive regime, this is in no sense a political novel. Only incidentally, and after one has put down the book, does one reflect on the situation out of which so fine, compassionate and exquisitely written a work has emerged.

Her last novel, A Guest of Honour,²⁴ of which Ms Gordimer said, "Everything I know I have put into this book",²⁵ is of epic proportions. The novel's hero, James Bray - undoubtedly

²³ "On the Brink," The Times Literary Supplement (July 7, 1966), 589.

²⁴ Nadine Gordimer, A Guest of Honour (London, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1971). All future references are to this edition.

²⁵ Nadine Gordimer, quoted in Publisher's Weekly (December 28, 1970), 21.

the author's most admirable hero - returns to the unnamed African country from which, ten years previously, his white colleagues had had him evicted for his open espousal of the cause of African independence. The novel explores the dilemma of the white liberal, caught between opposing solutions to the problems of Africa; solutions which are represented by the president, Mweta, on one side, and the old pre-independence fighter, Shinza, on the other. As a close friend of both men, Bray attempts to honour personal loyalties but finds, in the end, that truth to his liberal principles demands that he make a political choice.

Alongside this major conflict runs Bray's personal life, his growing relationship with a young married woman, Rebecca Edwards, who is separated from her husband; through this relationship Ms Gordimer explores her persistent theme of living life fully. Bray's being drawn to Rebecca in preference to his wife Olivia, who becomes an increasingly distant figure in England during the novel, and to Shinza in preference to Mweta, is based on his perception that Olivia and Mweta no longer touch the things he believes in.

A Guest of Honour drew consistently high praise from reviewers, awed by its "scope", the richness of the writing, revealing again the author's "superb eye and sense of timing for detail",²⁶ and her "special gift for patient and painstaking honesty",²⁷ and the sense that it provides "a picture of Africa

²⁶ Jonathan Raban, "Pain and Panic," New Statesman (May 14, 1971), 677.

²⁷ "Scenes from East African Life," The Times Literary Supplement (May 14, 1971), 555.

in transition, with more truth than one likes to acknowledge."²⁸ The all-inclusiveness of that picture, the vast range of characters, and the treatment of the problems facing newly independent African states on the level of personal effects and ideological debate, places A Guest of Honour in a class of its own among African novels. It also raises the question of whether there is any country where "a man of honour", sensitive, cultivated, committed to social justice and the pursuit of the full life, can live anymore without finding the conflicts of that society making a demand for forms of political action which are anathema to his humane and tolerant spirit.

In praising the work of her South African predecessor, Olive Schreiner, Nadine Gordimer stressed the importance of the fact that Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm had addressed itself to the question, "What is the life of man?"²⁹ Ms Gordimer's own work is persistently concerned with the possibilities for living life fully, and, in her exploration of that theme, she draws certain conclusions about the nature and meaning of life which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

It is possible, also, to read Ms Gordimer's South African novels as a record of the increasing frustration of libe-

²⁸ Edward Weeks, "The Peripatetic Reviewer," Atlantic Monthly (February, 1971), 126.

²⁹ Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa," The Times Literary Supplement (August 11, 1961).

eral principles in South Africa over the period of approximately twenty years spanned by the novels. But the important point is that the "record" is not a political one as such; rather, it is a revelation of the effects of discriminatory laws on the quality of life in South African society, of which the world of Johannesburg, the most common setting of the novels, is a microcosm.

In the course of the four novels, Nadine Gordimer repeatedly displays an honesty and fidelity to the realities of the situation which prevents her from giving an account which is purely impersonal and analytic, or a romanticised picture of the struggle to remain truly alive and caring. There is, rather, a duality to her approach which leads her to a sympathetic portrayal of characters, but also to an objective analysis of character, experience and circumstances.

Her concern with personal relationships, and with the quality of daily life produces many acute observations about those small gestures, shades of feeling, and unspoken communications which are so much a part of our nature that they usually go unnoticed; her repeated attention to these suggests a belief that the definition of our humanity lies in the range and richness of human awareness and response; a range and richness which oppressive social forces restrict and distort to the point where it is impossible for us, as it is for Liz van den Sandt, to be sure of the meaning of "life" or the meaning of "love".

The development of events in A Guest of Honour, cul-

minating in the painfully ironic use of British troops to "restore order" in the country, suggests that it is^b not only in South Africa that "society is the political situation",³⁰ but that the South African situation may simply represent a more advanced and oppressive form of a general reality in the modern world. If that is so, then the implications of Ms Gordimer's novels deserve general concern and attention.

23. ³⁰ Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa," loc. cit.,

CHAPTER 2

LIFE, LOVE AND THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH: THE THEMES OF THE NOVELS

Nadine Gordimer's constant theme is life; life against the forces that seek to restrict it, and to prevent one from living it fully.

The first restrictions come in the form of parental attitudes and values, which are representative of those of society at large. To live, one must test those attitudes and values against one's own experience; to grow, one must be open to experience, and must extract from it the truths which will form the basis of one's own attitudes and values.

What matters most in life is the living of it; personal relationships matter; we become people "according to the measure in which we have loved people and have had occasion for loving."¹ Sex is part of love, and is, Liz van den Sandt claims, "the defining need of our youth."²

There is also an "inner" life which reflects "the true graph of experience," and which may have little relationship to the exterior series of events by which other people sum up one's life. The changes which take place in people come about as the result of a process which is "a long, slow mutation of emotion," not as a result of "the conscious changes made in their lives by men and women."³

¹ The quotation from Boris Pasternak is one of the epigraphs to Occasion for Loving.

² The Late Bourgeois World, p.12.

³ The Lying Days, p.222.

All of these ideas are tested against experience and, in the process of that testing, become confirmed, modified, or rejected. The chief characters in the novels are made to face certain truths, and indeed it is an essential part of a genuine approach to life to seek the truth. When the values of parents are tested, they are usually found wanting. Liz van den Sandt says, in The Late Bourgeois World, "Most of what there was to learn from my family and background has turned out to be hopelessly obsolete, for me."⁴ Her former husband, Max, is presented as someone who rebelled against his conservative Afrikaner background. All of the novels, in fact, show rebellion against parents and their attitudes as a part of growing up.

A less pleasant discovery, which Toby Hood is forced to make, in A World of Strangers, is that one cannot "take care of [one's] own relationships with men and women who come into [one's] life, and let the abstractions of race and politics go hang," because politics impinges increasingly on personal life through the course of the four novels. The Late Bourgeois World delivers the most bitter blow to the hope of living one's life fully, and to the belief that the affairs of the external world need not disturb the "true graph of experience." Liz is forced to acknowledge that:

Decades, eras, centuries - they don't have much meaning, now, when the imposition of an emergency

⁴ The Late Bourgeois World, p.12.

law or the fall of a bomb change life more profoundly in a day than one might reasonably expect to experience in a lifetime.⁵

Thus, two major groups of themes are opposed in the novels: on the one side there is the exploration of possibilities, the attempt to live fully, and to discover the truth about life; on the other side is the increasing impingement of social forces which seek to restrict, to force the individual to conform, to prevent the "private liver" from retaining "the safe conduct of the open mind."⁶

Life becomes more and more, then, a constant struggle, a constant rebellion; a repeated attempt to assert the value of personal relationships, the value of love against the weight of politics and the attitudes it engenders. Politics becomes the prime evil, the force which distorts life, which drives it to hypocrisy, indifference and stagnation in those who submit; those who seek to assert life, it thwarts; it becomes the unavoidable antagonist, and life becomes a rebellion which is forced to become increasingly political and increasingly violent.

There is, then, a progression through the first four novels. In as much as all of them return repeatedly to the same concerns, the five novels could be read as a roman fleuve, with the last, A Guest of Honour, to be taken as the culmination. As it treats, in a new setting, the possibilities for living fully and for the realisation of liberal dreams, it

5 The Late Bourgeois World, p.65.

6 A World of Strangers, p.263.

will be treated separately from the first four "South African" novels.

The portrait of life given in each of the first four novels varies, as do the aspects of life concentrated on in them. . The Lying Days provides the fullest treatment of growing up; the stages of Helen Shaw's development are revealed through her personal relationships. ⁷In A World of Strangers, a series of concurrent relationships is used to chart the course of Toby Hood's first year in South Africa. Portraits of social life are fuller than in the first novel, are given in more detail, and are inspected more slowly. Occasion for Loving provides the fullest treatment of the "inner" life, through the broodings and reminiscences of Jessie Stilwell. Alongside Jessie's exploration into herself is set Ann Davis and Gideon Shibalo's testing of the possibilities for a love relationship between a white person and a black person in South Africa. In The Late Bourgeois World, Liz van den Sandt does not so much live as relive her life with Max, and the search is to discover the truth about that life, how much it was frustrated, and by what; and to attempt to find "under what stone" the "possibilities" lie or have lain.⁷

⁷ From the quotation from Kafka which is one of the epigraphs to The Late Bourgeois World. The full quotation, which reflects the aura of uncertainty in the novel, is: "There are possibilities for me, certainly; but under what stone do they lie?"

There are several strands to Helen Shaw's development in The Lying Days: There is growth from dependence on her parents, through increasing conflict with them, to complete independence. This, naturally, goes hand-in-hand with the growth of self-awareness and the development of independent attitudes and ideas. There is also physical and emotional growth, which is largely revealed in terms of increasing sexual awareness and sexual experience - a movement from holding hands, to kissing, to a dim awareness of desire for sexual intercourse, to an eventual complete sexual and emotional relationship. Yet another strand, which is connected to the development of independent ideas and attitudes, is the slow acquisition of broader cultural awareness, and of social and political awareness. And to these are connected the slow change from looking upon Africans through the eyes of her parents, to seeing them as fellow human beings in a way that her parents will never do.

The seeds of all of this are contained in the first chapter of the novel. Significantly, the first incident in the novel is an act of rebellion on Helen's part. She sulkily refuses to say what she wishes to do, when her plan to go out with her friend Olwen becomes frustrated, and her parents go off to their tennis match, leaving her to her own devices. What she embarks on is an exploration of her physical surroundings; an exploration that will be paralleled later by her first steps into the world of love with Ludi, and her venture into the world of books and ideas with Joel.

The end of the chapter confirms her dependence on her parents, as her exploratory walk eventually winds its way to the tennis courts. There she takes pleasure in the admiration with which her parents' grown-up friends greet her precocious cleverness. She feels "accepted as one of them."⁸ But incipient rejection of this society is intimated in the remark, "It was easy to be one of them because I soon knew their jokes as well as they did themselves ..."⁹ There is a definite, if unarticulated, recognition behind that statement of the limitations to that way of life whose superficiality she is later to reject.

The rejection will begin to be articulated when she has gone to the sea to stay with her mother's widowed friend, Mrs Koch, and has her first awakening to love with Mrs Koch's son, Ludi. But the first stirrings of sexual awareness are also contained in the first chapter. Seeing an African urinating, during the course of her walk, she seems to be stirred by a sense of something indefinable associated with this act, because her reaction is not one of repulsion at "bad behaviour" (as it had been towards Paddy Connolly's brother). She says:

Not shock but a sudden press of knowledge, hot and unwanted, came upon me. A question that had waited inside me but had never risen into words or thoughts because there were no words for it - 10 no words with myself, my mother, with Olwen even.

It is interesting to compare the feeling expressed here with

⁸ The Lying Days, p.14.

⁹ Ibid., p.14.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.13.

that contained in her relatively bland statement at the tennis courts a little while later: "I blushed when the young men chaffed me in a way that seemed to deepen some secret between them and the girls."¹¹ The second reaction seems decidedly polite; the very language - "blushed", "some secret" - contrasts strongly with "sudden press," "hot and unwanted." The difference manifests itself later in the conflict between her mother's moral attitude and Helen's own conduct; between the polite, teasing sexual mimicry of outward behaviour, and the fierce, intense passion which is characterised by her reference to orgasm as "that final physical crucifixion of pleasure."¹²

Helen's references to Africans in the first chapter are also significant, particularly her knowledge that "a little girl must not be left alone because there [are] native boys, about."¹³ What is important is that she is dissatisfied with the absence of any causal relation's being given to her, by her parents, between her safety and the presence of "native boys." After the remark just quoted, we are told, "That was all." The curt sentence indicates not only the absence of connection referred to above, but dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction will later become the basis of a major conflict between Helen and her parents; a conflict which provides the final spur to her leaving home.

¹¹ The Lying Days, p.14.

¹² Ibid., p.269.

¹³ Ibid., p.3.

Helen Shaw's growth to independence of attitude, a determination to look at the world herself, and make her own judgements about it, may be seen to be prefigured in her walk to the tennis courts. The walk also reveals her extraordinary sensitivity to life around her. She is, as well, minutely sensitive to her own reactions and to human relationships. When she remarks, "my mother's face waited, as if I had spoken and she had not quite heard,"¹⁴ the alertness of senses which can distinguish so subtle a gesture of unspoken communication is clearly meant to be unusual. It is a property possessed in varying degrees by all of Nadine Gordimer's characters; indeed, it is almost a pre-condition for major status in her novels that a character should be alert to life, to the physical environment, to the small expressions of feeling and understanding.

It is as a result of such alertness, and as a result of fidelity to the teachings of one's own experience that one comes to rebel against a world "which substitute[s] rules for the pull and stress of human conflict which are the true conditions of life."¹⁵ Helen's rebellion against her parents and the society of the Mine begins to take shape in the section, "The Sea." Helen, now eighteen, has gone on holiday to her mother's friend, Mrs Koch, who has a house near the sea in Natal. Helen's distance from the world of the Mine is first conveyed through her inability to find some image with

¹⁴ The Living Days, p.3.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.218.

which to conjure up that world.¹⁶ It is later expressed more explicitly:

I understood that almost all of my life at home, on the Mine, had been like that, conducted on a surface of polite triviality that was insensitive to the real flow of life that was being experienced, underneath, all the time, by everybody.¹⁷

This realisation is clearly related to her growing love affair with Mrs Koch's son, Ludi, a young man in his mid-twenties who has expressed distaste for the sort of industrialised society which the Mine is.

As this articulation of her rejection of the superficiality of the society of the Mine has come about as the result of the development of one strand of Helen's life - her experience of love - so her eventual break with her family is the result of another "strand's" developing. Helen, attempting to help her fellow student, Mary Seswayo, through whom we are shown the multiple difficulties for Africans who have managed to enter a university, wishes to offer her a room in her parents' house so that Mary can prepare for the examinations free of the strain of the daily journey to and from her home in the African townships. The parents refuse Helen's request in order to avoid the complications that might develop for them out of their having an African living in their house. The conflict over this, with its revelation of the parents' prejudice not only against Africans, but against Jews as well, in the person of Helen's then boy-friend, Joel,

¹⁶ The Lying Days, p.41.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.62.

is a measure of how far parents and daughter have already moved apart in their attitudes.

Plunged into the world of the university and of "The City," Johannesburg, Helen begins to form her own friendships, and to become part of a different society. The "plunge" is, in fact, simply an indication of the moment of the break, for the shift into another "world" has been going on for some time. By the time she moves to the city, Helen has already recognised and characterised the society to which she now feels she belongs:

Loosely attached to the arts and learning at one end, and to politics and social reform at the other, this society is a common phenomenon all over the world. The important difference was that in South Africa, a young, fanatically materialist country with virtually no tradition of literature or art, and, in the problem position of a white minority predominant over a black majority, a socio-political preoccupation that is closer to obsession than to mild academic discussion, this society had far greater responsibility than its counterparts in older countries.¹⁸

The statement condenses into a few lines the essence of what was then, and still largely is, the liberal position in South Africa; not only the definition of it, but the identification of its difficulties. It also suggests a sense of identification with a worldwide community of like-minded souls. Having expressed all of this, Helen Shaw's drive for honesty forces her to add that:

Of course, this society ... was made up to a large extent of people for whom it was only a stage in

¹⁸ The Lying Days, p.141.

the process of becoming placid, conventional citizens.¹⁹

The genuinely alive and committed person is distinguished from those who submit and become "placid, conventional citizens."

Helen's break with her parents and the society of the Mine is pushed further by her relationship with Paul. Their feeding on and fuelling of each other's sexual passion seems to be as indiscriminate as that of Ann Davis and Gideon Shibaló in Occasion for Loving. Another boy-friend, Charles Bessemer, had already seen in Helen's eyes:

the contradiction between [her] headlong passion and a prohibitive fear that survived [from] the moral code of [her] parents which [she] believed [she] had rejected.²⁰

But with Paul Helen desires far more - "to understand another in his deepest being."²¹ And it is through her relationship with him, and his work in African affairs, that she begins to become more aware of politics. It is also through Paul that her mother's rejection of her is pushed to an extreme. When Mrs Shaw discovers that Helen and Paul have been living together, her anger is not simply on account of Helen's being someone who rejects "what any other reasonable person likes;"²² her daughter has become "a filthy beast" to her.²³ Helen's

¹⁹ The Lying Days, p.142.

²⁰ Ibid, p.164.

²¹ Ibid, p.212

²² Ibid, p.173.

²³ Ibid, p.250.

rebellion against her parents and the society of the Mine, is, then, directly connected with increasing experience; the more she explores life, the more the conclusions she reaches carry her away from the attitudes and values of her parents.

In A World of Strangers, Toby Hood has already rebelled against certain aspects of his upbringing when the book begins. Presumably, he has already gone through the stages which Helen undergoes in The Lying Days, since she is twenty-four at the end of her story, Toby twenty-six at the beginning of his. Rejecting his parents' advocacy of "causes", and their attempts to have him become committed, Toby comes to South Africa to represent the family publishing firm, Aden Parrot, and is determined that he will not allow the "abstractions of race and politics" to decide his behaviour and his choice of friends. He spells out his position most clearly in an argument with Anna Louw, whose legal work on behalf of Africans and former marriage to an Indian belie her conservative Afrikaans background. In the course of the argument, Toby distinguishes between "private lives" and "public lives" in a passage that illustrates, by its ascriptions of several possible motives to each way of life, the author's determination not to sacrifice "the possible revelation of a private contradiction" or shortcoming for the sake of making a "political point."²⁴ It is another small illustration that "truth" must be sought and revealed. The chief significance

²⁴ Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa," loc. cit.

of the passage, however, is the distinction drawn by Toby:

there are two kinds of people, people with public lives, and people with private lives. The people with public lives are concerned with a collective fate, the private livers with an individual one. But...the private livers have become hunted people. ... You must join. You must be Communist or Anti-Communist, Nationalist or Kaffirboetie ... And all these things you must do ...

.....
The public life people have always responded to pressure from within - their own conscience, sense of responsibility towards others, ambition, and so on; but the private livers, in whom these things are latent, weak, or differently directed could go on simply going their own ways, unless the pressure from outside became too strong. Well, now it's just bloody irresistible.²⁵

The novel, in effect, proves his final point, however much Toby Hood wishes it to be otherwise. Throughout, he attempts to "go his own way," moving from the world of "The High House," through the intermediate ground of inter-racial parties, to the African "locations". Each of these worlds has a representative figure in the novel: Cecil Rowe in the first, Anna Louw in the second, and Steven Sithole in the third. Through his relationships with these people, Toby Hood explores the various "worlds", which are revealed to us in his detailed observations of people and settings; and through him, Nadine Gordimer provides us with a portrait of South African society on various levels.

The world of "The High House" is one to which he gains access through his mother's acquaintance, in much earlier days in England, with the mistress of the house, Marion Alexander. Ironically, the Alexanders are precisely the sort of

²⁵ A World of Strangers, pp.122-123.

people whom his parents would most have castigated. They are, at the highest social level, the sort of people whom Helen Shaw attacked; those who in their youth espoused liberal ideas and:

would sometimes like to mention that they had gone in for that sort of thing once; they had also had measles or mumps and had at one time thought of going on the stage ...²⁶

Toby Hood, using very similar terms, suggests that his parents had perhaps embodied for Marion Alexander

the causes of the Thirties, to which she remembered herself responding for a time, just as she had taken to cloche hats a year or two earlier.²⁷

This dilettantishness, the blithe lumping together of trivial shifts in fashion with what should be major changes in one's attitudes, is one characteristic of the world of "The High House," revealed again in Cecil Rowe's, "Oh I thought it was jolly good," in reference to a book making a passionate religious outcry against the failure of Christianity to improve white attitudes towards blacks in South Africa. Toby characterises Cecil's response as being the same as that towards "a novel that had served to pass the evening."²⁸

The world of "The High House" is further characterised by its occupants' being shown as perpetually drinking, dining, swimming and riding. It has the atmosphere of:

²⁶ The Lying Days, p.142

²⁷ A World of Strangers, p.54.

²⁸ Ibid, p.61

those rooms conjured up by Genii for people in fairy stories who always seem to wish for the same sort of thing, as if, given the chance, nobody really knows anything else to wish for.²⁹

The sense of abundance, of other-worldliness, and of sameness conveyed by this analogy contrasts powerfully with the poverty of the African locations, as the superficiality of The High House - revealed in its "high actressy voices"³⁰ - contrasts with the abject, down-to-earth reality of the world of the African townships.

As The High House becomes personified for Toby by Cecil Rowe, an empty-headed divorcee, hedonistically pursuing her own brittle pleasures and success while paying scant attention to the welfare of her son, so the African locations, or townships, are personified by Steven Sithole, who rebels against white oppression by refusing to become "committed" to the African cause, but lives, nevertheless, "in defiance of everything that would attempt to make him half alive."³¹ It is the similarity between Cecil Rowe's approach to life and Steven Sithole's approach which draws Toby Hood to them as individuals; it is the disparity between the "worlds" out of which the similar approach emerges that causes him to reflect on another idea about life - why the "life of poverty is regarded as more real than any other life."³² And he decides that for the Africans, who live "the life of poverty,"

²⁹ A World of Strangers, p.61.

³⁰ Ibid, p.50.

³¹ Ibid, p.124.

³² Ibid, p.157.

"The reality was nearer the surface." Where the girls from Cecil Rowe's world who "had had broken love affairs" could escape from the unhappiness by "going off to Europe," the girl in a similar situation in Steven's world could do nothing but "sit on the step and wait for her bastard to be born."³³

Toby's movements between these "worlds" lead him repeatedly to the sort of reflections which form, for all Ms Gordimer's major characters, the extraction of truth from one's experience. And Toby comes to the realisation, well before the end of the novel, that he cannot tell his African friends "how pleasant it was to be lulled and indulged at The High House," nor tell Cecil and his High House acquaintances "the freedom [he] felt" in the African locations.³⁴ He supposes that he will have to "belong to one or the other, for keeps."³⁵ Yet he is still attempting to be a "private liver" and to hide "the irreconcilables of the way [he is] living" even from himself.³⁶

In the end, however, he is deprived of the "safe conduct of the open mind" - the mental passport which allows the "private liver" to form his own friendships without regard to social "right" or "wrong", and to treat people simply as people. The irony is that Toby Hood chooses the African

³³ A World of Strangers, p.158.

³⁴ Ibid, p.203.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

"camp", precisely the one which his parents would have wanted him to choose, because it would mean espousing the right "cause". But his choice surely arises out of the distinction that, at The High House he felt "pleasant", but in the African locations he felt "freedom"; and the way in which he had described the sense of liveliness in the locations suggests that the choice he has made is a choice in favour of "life".

Where The Lying Days can be used to illustrate life as rebellion against one's parents, and the stages by which a young person comes to discover and establish a way of life for himself or herself; and where A World of Strangers provides the best illustration of the frustrations of a "private liver" attempting to maintain the "safe conduct of the open mind" in a world which demands commitment, Occasion for Loving give us an insight into the "inner" world in which the "true graph of experience" is plotted.

Well before the love affair between Ann Davis and Gideon Shibaló begins to develop, we have been made aware of the inner musings of Jessie Stilwell, in whose house Ann and her Jewish musicologist husband, Boaz, are boarding. Not even Tom, Jessie's husband, is really privy to her musings. The contrast between husband and wife is figured in terms of the garden; Tom is practical about it, wants to impose some order on it. Tom "showed her the garden ... as it was" but she "withdrew quietly, driftingly, immediately from the garden as he presented it."³⁷

37 Occasion for Loving, p.28.

Jessie's withdrawal from Tom's version of the garden is a metaphor for her withdrawal, repeatedly, from "the surface facts of life"³⁸ to the inner world of her past, a world into which she burrows more and more deeply to retrieve the significant images and incidents which have formed her. We see her at the Mine Dances drifting away into private thoughts and feelings and having to move back to the "surface facts" in order to carry on the common activities from which the others in the party do not appear to have retreated.

The first significant incident to which Jessie returns is a Christmas when she was seventeen. Through it, the distance between her mother and step-father, and Jessie's being prevented from joining in the activities of the other young people of her age are revealed. The feeling she attaches to the occasion is that of having been cheated of her youth. It conjures up in her mind the image of "the body of her youth out in the mud."³⁹ Yet, to indicate how her life has changed and changed again, how incidents from the past come to be viewed from different perspectives as time passes, we are told that:

Later ... Jessie saw that weekend in the critical light of the needs of new growth and shunned it out of disgust for herself as she had been then.

.....

Still later, she saw that the weekend was terribly funny ... and then it had been recalled

³⁸ Occasion for Loving, p.34.

³⁹ Ibid, p.42.

too many times to seem funny anymore.⁴⁰

The formative power of the fact that she had been deprived of her youth cannot be changed; but the perspective from which she comes to view an occasion which once had symbolic significance can shift, and shift again.

A more important memory, because of the implications it has if it is generally applicable, is one which is conveyed early in the book, but the significance of which is not revealed until quite close to the end. In Chapter 5, Jessie refers, in the midst of other troubling feelings she had had when young, to a fear she felt of someone "coming up behind" her.⁴¹ It is only in Chapter 18, in the course of a conversation with Gideon Shibalo, that the true nature and complexity of this "fear" is revealed; and one assumes that it has emerged as a result of her having moved "down there in the past" sufficiently for the "components" of this "fear"⁴² to have become clear. She says to Gideon:

I remember what was left out when I settled the race business once and for all. I remember the black men who rubbed the floor round my feet when I was twelve and fourteen. I remember the young black man with a bare chest, mowing the lawn. The bare legs and strong arms that carried things for us ... I used to feel at night, when I turned my back to the dark passage ... that someone was coming up behind me. Who was it, do you think? And how many more little white girls are there for whom the very first man was a black

⁴⁰ Occasion for Loving, p.42.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.70.

⁴² Ibid, pp.67-68.

man? The very first man, the man of the sex fantasies⁴³

If one recalls the "sudden press of knowledge, hot and unwanted" which had come upon Helen Shaw while looking at a black man urinating, and considers that it might be related to Jessie's statement, then the implications of this revelation, dredged from the past by Jessie's efforts to come to terms with the truth, could be far-reaching, and may cast some reflection on Ann Davis' love affair with Gideon Shiba-lo, especially as we have had the suggestion that Ann "remembered more of Africa than she told Boaz; she told Boaz, perhaps, only what she wanted."⁴⁴ In the same paragraph, Jessie, in her curiosity about Ann, makes the even more telling observation that Ann:

might rush into things with her hands out before her, like the little girls after dragon-flies, but it would probably follow that, like the little girls, she would not be aware of her own motives.⁴⁵

The remark is prophetic about Ann's relationship with Gideon, and, in the context of Ann's remembering things about Africa which she does not reveal to her husband, seems to suggest that, like Jessie's, Ann's "first man" was a black man. That Jessie is suggesting this seems to be underlined by the fact that she prefaced her revelation to Gideon with the rhetorical question: "Do you know what I think while I look at you

⁴³ Occasion for Loving, p.267.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.26.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

and Ann?"⁴⁶ The musing, the attempt to get to the bottom of things, the wide separation of these remarks in the book is all illustrative of Jessie's nature and of the repeatedly inspected "inner" life, which contrasts with the immediate, external life personified by Ann.

Ann is revealed as behaving in very much the way that Jessie predicts. She is alive in a quick, immediate way; someone whose "questions and comments darted like swallows;"⁴⁷ who was "in and out of the house, with a word and a telegraphic smile, between one diversion and another."⁴⁸ She seems, in her careless disregard for the colour bar, to be one of Toby Hood's "private livers." She makes friendships with whom she wishes, and treats everyone on the level of person to person, without allowing the "abstractions of race and politics" to modify her actions and reactions; in fact, she is completely oblivious to them: "for her the colour bar did not exist."⁴⁹ But Ms Gordimer increasingly suggests the shortcomings of this way of life, in terms of its being lived with regard only to the present. There is surely something of an ominous note in the fairly early statement about Ann that: "The present was the only dimension of time she knew; she woke every day to her freedom of it."⁵⁰ As the stress

⁴⁶ Occasion for Loving, p.267

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.31.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.19.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.285.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.93.

on "her" suggests an independence bordering on the selfish, so the absence of "tomorrow" in her approach to life intimates a recklessness. It is not surprising, then, that we are told later that Ann was "hardly aware of how she was going or what direction she was taking."⁵¹ To be alive is fine, to be fresh and genuine in one's responses to people is also admirable; but to live only for the moment, and to take no account of consequences can prove disastrous.

The Late Bourgeois World presents another modification of the theme of "life" and "living fully". Hints of what one might have expected from this book can be seen in Occasion for Loving; much as a single line from Lorca in The Lying Days was expanded into the epigraph to A World of Strangers,⁵² and as the friendship, between black and white, of Steven Sithole and Toby Hood in the second novel can be seen to be more fully explored in the love affair between Ann and Gideon, in the third novel, so we find "carry-overs" from the third novel to the fourth: there is the unexplained remark of Tom's on which Jessie harps - "she wanted him drowned"⁵³ - refer-

⁵¹ Occasion for Loving, p.169.

⁵² In The Lying Days (pp.243-244), Paul refers to "the line of a poem by Lorca that Helen liked - 'a black boy to announce to the gold-minded whites the arrival of the reign of the ear of corn.'" It actually comprises two lines of Lorca's poem, and the fuller quotation is the epigraph to the second novel. Unlike the epigraphs to Ms Gordimer's other novels, which define what is to happen, this one is the expression of a hope that is not realised.

⁵³ Occasion for Loving, p.287.

ring to Ann and Gideon; there is Tom's thought that "there would be more sense in blowing up a power station; but it would be Jessie who would help somebody to do it, perhaps, in time;"⁵⁴ and there are Jessie's questions, in relation to Gideon, but clearly meant to apply to all blacks: "What's the good of us to him? What's the good of our friendship or her love?"⁵⁵ In The Late Bourgeois World, the event with which the novel opens is the arrival of the telegramme announcing that Liz's former husband, Max, had drowned himself; one of the major events in Max's life had been the attempt to blow up a post office; and "love" is connected with Liz's assistance to the African revolutionaries Reba and Luke.

The Late Bourgeois World is, in fact, concerned with life and love; Liz returns repeatedly to the question of what love is, whether it is Max's need to be admired, Graham Mill's bunch of flowers (which showed that he had remembered the kind for which she had expressed a particular liking when they had been on holiday together in Europe), or whether it is any one of several other "definitions" that are "neither more nor less acceptable"⁵⁶ than Max's desire for approval. And what is life? Is it the route of rebellion which Max took, and which carried him eventually to the bottom of the sea? Is it striving

⁵⁴ Occasion for Loving, p.297.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.288.

⁵⁶ The Late Bourgeois World, p.60. Even at the end of the novel (p.119) we find Liz still offering possible definitions.

to reach the moon? Is it the preservation of her grandmother in a nursing home?

The raising of these questions is the process of the book. And they arise out of the various incidents which make up Liz van den Sandt's day after the arrival of the telegramme informing her of Max's suicide. In the end, she suggests that Max was driven by ambition, expressing itself as a desire for admiration from others. It was that desire which led Max to make love to Felicity Hare, the "big, red-faced girl just down from Cambridge who had wanted to 'do something' in Africa."⁵⁷ It is that ambition which Liz points to obliquely when she says, "You can go down after love or up after the moon,"⁵⁸ after the connection had earlier drifted into her mind - "When Max drowned today, a man walked about in space."⁵⁹

Earlier in her recollections and retellings, Liz had indicated the source of Max's ambition:

Max shunned the van den Sandts' standards of success but in a way they triumphed in him ... he retained the vengeful need to be acknowledged. It came from them: the desire to show somebody.⁶⁰

Max had rebelled against his background. Forsaking the com-

⁵⁷ The Late Bourgeois World, p.61.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.115.

⁵⁹ Ibid. It is possible to read this "connection" as a suggestion that the drive for industrial progress is inimical to "life", a suggestion perhaps reinforced by Bray's choice, in A Guest of Honour of the socially-concerned Shinza over Mweta, who aligns himself with the large industrial concerns.

⁶⁰ The Late Bourgeois World, p.64.

forts which his parents' wealth and social position (his father had been a front-bench M.P.) could give him, he had eventually espoused the cause of African freedom. Max's early life is a restatement of the theme of "life as rebellion"; his speech at his sister's wedding made clear not only his repudiation of the values of his parents and the social group to which they belonged, but that one had to repudiate those values in order to "stay alive."⁶¹ Another idea which is repeated from the first novel is made clear by Liz's statement that, although Max had repudiated that way of life, part of it lived on in him. The idea has already been suggested with reference to Toby Hood, in his alignment with people whose cause his parents would have wanted him to espouse. And Helen Shaw had also discovered that part of what she thought she had rejected was so deeply engrained in her that it seemed to be in her very blood:

blood which ran narrowly and which I hated because it had survived and always would survive ... by draining off the real torrents which bear along human lives into neat ditches of domestic and social habit ...⁶²

Thus the idea emerges of inherited factors which shape people's lives, despite their rebellion, despite their attempts to create a completely different way of life.

As indicated before, the form of rebellion by which life and independence is asserted in The Late Bourgeois World, is

⁶¹ The Late Bourgeois World, p.37.

⁶² The Lying Days, p.272.

far more directly political than it was in any of the previous novels. Liz and Max had contributed to "discussion and study groups," attended "open-air meetings," participated in "demonstrations".⁶³ Eventually, however, Max had gone on alone; they had been divorced, and she had left the political "struggle". Although her lover, Graham Mill, "defends many people on political charges" and ignores "the possible consequences," both of them keep their "hands clean" in terms of fuller participation.⁶⁴ But there is a lurking suggestion that Liz is not entirely happy about her clean hands and the way in which she keeps them clean. The suggestion emerges from the defensive tone in which she indicates that, although neither Graham nor herself are actively involved, they still retain some fidelity to the "cause":

Neither of us makes money out of cheap labour or performs a service confined to people of a particular colour. For myself, thank God shit and blood are all the same, no matter whom they come from.⁶⁵

Throughout the novel, Nadine Gordimer is getting her narrator to reveal herself - her inner misgivings and uncertainties - to us in this way, through the meticulously careful phrasing of Liz's remarks. Thus, the concluding chapters, in which she sways pendulum-like back and forth between the possibility of assisting Luke Fokase, and the excuses she can

⁶³ The Late Bourgeois World, p.48.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.44.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

fabricate to forestall the necessity of making that decision, which she knows will mean becoming an active participant in the political struggle again - that final tortuous movement, has really been prepared for all along. The hint of guilt in the last passage quoted suggests, as well, what Liz's decision will be. What lies behind that decision - a sense of guilt because she couldn't give Max "the approval and admiration"⁶⁶ he needed; a more passionate desire for Luke Fokase than is suggested by her "perhaps I want it"⁶⁷ - the "it" being sexual intercourse with Luke, and the "perhaps" appearing decidedly evasive in the context of her other thoughts surrounding that one - of the motivation for her decision, one cannot be sure. Helen Shaw said:

The truth about humans is always inaccurate, never bare; the nearest one can get to it is to remember its confusion and complicatedness.⁶⁸

The texture of the writing in The Late Bourgeois World conveys the "confusion and complicatedness" about Liz van den Sandt and her motivations; what she intends to do is a little clearer. When she says, "Everything is impossible if one calculates on the safe side,"⁶⁹ she seems to be chiding herself for having thought of every excuse she could to get out of making a commitment to Luke; and the pendulum swing of her

⁶⁶ The Late Bourgeois World, p.64

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.119.

⁶⁸ The Lying Days, p.60.

⁶⁹ The Late Bourgeois World, p.119.

mind between participation and evasion is made to sound as the final expression of the book: "the slow, even beats of my heart repeat ... like a clock; afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive ..."⁷⁰ It seems clear that this is a presentation of alternatives: evasion, participation; and it is interesting that to choose to act, to become part of rebellion again, is equated with being "alive". The major shift which has occurred over the course of the four novels is that to "live" now means unquestionably to participate in political action. A related idea was touched on by Jessie Stilwell in a passage which seems to link together most of the ideas about life conveyed in Ms Gordimer's novels. The passage is worth quoting at length since it touches on sincerity of purpose in seeking the truth about life, commitment to social reform, and intellectual integrity; it also touches on Liz's remark about sex as "the defining need of youth." In a period of reflection, arising out of Jessie's reading of de Chardin's Phenomenon of Man, she draws a distinction between "consolation-seekers" and "real doubters," referring to de Chardin's treatise, she says that it was:

a book that, that year, people were reading who, without distinctions of worth, had last year read interpretations of Buddhism, and the year before Simone Weil, or Ouspensky. They were read, quite often, in the same half-secret, deprecating way in which the same people, when they were twenty, had read treatises on sex (The Function of the Orgasm), for people between thirty and forty tend to have toward the meaning of their existence the anxious, suppressed urgency which at twenty they felt about sex. The real doubters and the mere consolation-

⁷⁰ The Late Bourgeois World, p.120.

seekers often go to the same sources; and it is the consolation-seekers who usually find something that will serve them - and if they do not, go on to another and yet another source, finding consolation in the activity of the search, if nothing else. The real doubters include those for whom politics has gone as deep as sex, but the consolation-seekers are not intelligent enough to have sought any kind of discipline outside themselves; they have never wanted to change the world: only to get their sweet lick.⁷¹

The context of the passage clearly equates "real doubter" with "genuine seeker after truth." It is not enough to seek knowledge and experience; one must approach life with a healthy skepticism which will prevent one from becoming easily satisfied with the first "scrap"⁷² that suits one's needs. The person who is deeply committed to social reform, for whom "politics has gone as deep as sex," will be found among the "real doubters" because, presumably, such people have found a "discipline" in middle age which involves a passionate commitment and belief that touches their lives as profoundly as sexual passion does in youth.

For its affirmation of fidelity to one's experience, intellectual integrity, and moral responsibility, this passage is highly significant as a revelation of Nadine Gordimer's view of what life should be like. One may draw together all the ideas expressed in the four novels and cap them with the ones expressed here: to live, one must avoid having the current of one's life drawn off into "ditches of domestic and social habit;" the important things in life are love and per-

⁷¹ Occasion for Loving, p.205.

⁷² Ibid, p.206.

sonal relationships, but it is impossible, in the modern world, to pursue these free of social restrictions; the restrictions on life, not only on personal relationships, but on what one reads and what one is able to enjoy in the arts, come as the result of politics; even when one has broken free of parental restrictions and has established one's values in opposition to the restrictions of the political system, one may be tempted to seek in one's experience only what affirms the status quo of one's life, what will console one; to be truly alive, one must be truly open to change, a "real doubter," and one must desire to "change the world," to make it a better place.

The tenets of this view of life define the author's liberal position; but that is not how life is shown as being lived in the four novels. On the contrary, Helen Shaw's fearful remarks have proved prophetic: though "twenty years" have not quite passed, the "Nats" are still in power, and most people, more than ever have, by the time of The Late Bourgeois World, "put aside, laid away in lavender" the protest, against the constriction of life, which should have taken place in each one's "individual consciousness."⁷³

⁷³ The Lying Days, p.267.

CHAPTER 3

THE JACK-BOOT AND THE FLOWER

In his essay, "What I Believe," E. M. Forster spoke of the qualities which he valued as being like a flower, which was in danger of being crushed beneath a military jack-boot.¹ In looking at Nadine Gordimer's novels as reflections of political and social change in South Africa, one is looking, in part, at the crushing of the "flower" of South African liberalism. An excellent account of liberal aspirations in the country, and of their decline, is given in Janet Robertson's book,² which may be read as an analogue to Nadine Gordimer's South African novels. Briefly, the liberal hope had been the achievement of an integrated society in South Africa. This hope was already faint when South Africa became a Dominion, by the Act of Union, in 1910.³ It was dealt a major blow when Africans were removed from the voter rolls in the Cape Province, in 1936. The Cape had been the only province in which non-whites had had the vote. But liberal hopes for change persisted, and, as Ms Robertson points out, there was still vigorous liberal opposition to restrictive measures in

¹ E. M. Forster, Two Cheers for Democracy (New York, 1951), p.67.

² Janet Robertson, Liberalism in South Africa 1948-1963 (Oxford, 1971).

³ Ibid., p.6.

the mid-fifties.⁴ But, by the mid-sixties, the main opposition party in South Africa had moved towards the political right, giving its assent to repressive measures of the sort it had attacked in the fifties, and it was clear that the majority of South African whites accepted a "repressive policy towards non-whites," even though "loss of liberty for non-whites had inevitably meant loss of liberty for whites as well."⁵

The attack on the liberals in South Africa, and the erosion of civil liberties was carried on through the passage of repressive legislation, and through the harassment of individuals and organisations by the Security Branch (the political, secret police).⁶ The intent of the legislation was to destroy extra-parliamentary opposition to the policies of the Nationalist, pro-apartheid government. Organisations were banned, individuals placed under house arrest, and opportunities for contact between whites and non-whites made increasingly difficult and dangerous. Increasing white intransigence, and repression of most forms of political protest eventually drove some liberal groups and individuals, both white and non-white - to increasingly desperate measures, including the use of violence, which they had previously abjured.⁷

⁴ Robertson, p.128.

⁵ Ibid., p.231.

⁶ See Ms Robertson's chapter on "White unity and the dismantling of the liberal state," op. cit., pp.214-231.

⁷ Ibid., particularly pp.224, 227, 228.

It is against this background that Ms Gordimer's novels are set and one can trace, through them, the political changes and their effects on people's lives. The coming to power of the Nationalist Party, with its doctrine of apartheid, is referred to in The Lying Days, and it is the reaction to that political fact on the part of white liberals about which Helen Shaw expresses concern. She foresees that they "could sit for twenty years, like flies paralyzed but not killed by a spider, so long as the Nats are in power."⁸ The attitude conveyed here by Helen is a reflection of the mildness of most people's response to the Nationalists' accession to power. Although the growing antipathy of non-whites is reflected in the novel in the "Defiance Campaign," incidents from which figure in the closing chapters, and although there is reference to the passage of restrictive laws and the naming of people as communists, the force of political pressure is not potent in the novel.

A World of Strangers marks a noticeable progression - those who had merely been "named" in the first novel are now being arrested on charges of treason.⁹ But it is not until The Late Bourgeois World that political action really enters into Ms Gordimer's novels. There one is given a summary of the forms of political action which have been taken over the years, and the stages which political opposition has gone through in its attempts to counter the increasingly repressive

⁸ The Lying Days, p.267.

⁹ A World of Strangers, p.265.

measures taken against it. We are told that Max van den Sandt had participated in the "Defiance Campaign," and that there was a time when there were "still things you could do."¹⁰ But the sort of "things" liberal opponents of racialism were eventually driven to "do" are characterised by Max's attempt to blow up a post office; and the frustration of that attempt, with the arrest of Max and his colleagues before the bomb went off, is a measure of the extent to which the secret police had infiltrated organisations and could prevent such actions. We are also given in the novel, through Max's association with Spears Qwabe - an articulate African opponent of the government, whom Max is helping to set down in writing the ideas which form the basis of Spears' political philosophy - another part of the political picture, that of the struggle within the "underground" opposition itself, the quarrels and disagreements over points of policy and forms of action.

Though one can extract a picture of political developments from Ms Gordimer's novels, they are not primarily concerned, as the previous chapter indicated they were not, with politics. None of them exemplifies Irving Howe's definition of the political novel as one in which "we take to be dominant political ideas or the political milieu."¹¹ Nor do they cover the aspects of such novels treated by Joseph Blotner in his study of the genre. Mr Blotner treats the political novel

¹⁰ The Late Bourgeois World, p.48.

¹¹ Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1967), p.19.

as: a) political instrument, b) political historian, c) mirror of national character, d) analyst of political group behaviour, and e) analyst of individual political behaviour.¹² Although there is analysis of political behaviour in Ms Gordimer's novels, and although they can have a history of political change and a portrait of national character extracted from them, their real concern is with the quality of life in the country, and with the effects of political and social change on individuals and groups.

In The Lying Days, when Helen's parents refuse to allow Mary Seswayo to stay in their house, her father explains his decision in terms of his social position, and the possible effects on his retention of his job:

How can you have a native staying in the house?
I've got to think of my position too, you know ...
I can't do things like that ... Next thing is it
will be going round the group that I'm a Communist.¹³

His concern is with social appearance, but his remarks also reflect the way in which people will place a political interpretation upon a social action. The irony of the situation is that Mary agrees with the Shaws on the grounds that it is their house and the decision should, therefore, be theirs. But she also points out a flaw in Helen's thinking when she says: "Because I'm black she's got to say yes. Don't you see, if I am good enough, I'm good enough not to go where I'm not wanted."¹⁴

¹² Joseph L. Blotner, The Political Novel (New York, 1955). See especially the introductory chapter.

¹³ The Lying Days, p.174.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.183.

What Mary perceives is a corollary of an earlier observation which Helen had made:

in friendship with an African, a white person is inclined to submit his sincerity to tests by which he would not dream of measuring good will or affection toward another white person.¹⁵

The fact that Helen had made that observation did not make it any easier for her to see that she had expected her parents to refuse because Mary was black, and that that expectation was an indication of the extent to which she herself judged situations in terms of colour. Ms Gordimer is indicating here something of the thickness of the cocoon of racial prejudice which people have to break out of in South Africa if they are to deal genuinely with other people as people.

Another aspect of the white South African attitude revealed in the novel is indifference to the conditions in which black people live. This is well illustrated in a section (too lengthy to quote)¹⁶ in which one of Helen's passing boy-friends, Charles Bessemer, drives Mary Seswayo home. As they pass through the African township, Helen is horrified at the picture of deprivation and violence it presents; and Nadine Gordimer plays Helen's troubled reactions against the casual one-liners of the indifferent Charles. His "Christ, what a place," captures well the mental detachment, not only of one who does not care, but of one who sees the "place" as being quite unconnected with his own life. Toby Hood remarks on

¹⁵ The Lying Days, p.152.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.157-158.

the same kind of reaction when he observes that when he had heard "politics talked at The High House" it had "hardly seemed to be concerned with the same country" as the kind of politics he heard talked in the African townships and at multi-racial parties.¹⁷ It is this kind of indifference which makes most white South Africans appear quite unable to comprehend the humiliation and indignity which Africans have to suffer all the time; but, as Helen Shaw observed:

Statutes and laws and pronouncements may pass over the heads of people whom they concern, but shame does not need the medium of literacy ... a dog, a child too small to speak can sense it ...¹⁸

Although on the surface there is indifference, Ms Gordimer suggests that, deep down, there is guilt:

the slow, corrosive guilt, a guilt personal and inherited, amorphous as the air and particular as the tone of your voice, which, admitted or denied, is in all white South Africans.¹⁹

It is the kind of guilt which Max suggests, in The Late Bourgeois World, attempts to assuage itself by such actions as distributing "free blankets in the Location in winter."

But, as he goes on to point out in the same speech, that is only necessary because the same people refuse to pay "wages people could live on."²⁰

By the time of The Late Bourgeois World, those who hope to effect change have to counter not only indifference, but

¹⁷ A World of Strangers, p.209.

¹⁸ The Lying Days, p.235.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.191.

²⁰ The Late Bourgeois World, p.36.

the satisfactions which material comfort has brought. Liz reflects bitterly on a "silver cigarette case" being discussed by a woman sitting next to her at tea. To the woman's "when he goes out in the evening to parties, he really needs one," Liz responds vehemently in her mind, "And when he goes to the bottom of the sea? Will he need a silver cigarette case there?"²¹ It is a telling example of the immense distance between those who are comfortable - both in their luxuries and in their sense of security in their privileged position, entrenched by law - and those who are uncomfortable, because they are not oblivious to the lot of the non-whites, and have attempted to redress the injustice of the laws.

In several of the novels there are suggestions that "the comfortable" are not completely at ease, for all their comfort; that there is an inner gnawing, possibly as a result of "guilt". Liz notices that Mrs van den Sandt will never be able to forget Max's trial, that "some part of her mind would attend to [those] things as long as she lived, no matter what happened."²² Anna Louw suggests to Toby Hood another reason why the comfort may be less than genuinely satisfying. Speaking of the shallowness of life in South Africa's white cities, she says:

I used to think it was because everything in town life here relates to another world ... But now I think there's something else. Loneliness; of a special kind. Our loneliness. The lack of a com-

21 The Late Bourgeois World, p.24.

22 Ibid., p.27.

mon human identity. The loneliness of a powerful minority.²³

An agonising contrast to the "silver cigarette case" and to all the luxury of The High House, is given by the strange behaviour of William, the African who cleans the apartment building in which Cecil Rowe lives. Toby and Cecil observe "a ghastly ritual ... tearing anxiety of pacing and panting, climax of sobs, then panting again."²⁴ Cecil is extremely upset by this, and it becomes apparent that the cause of William's condition is "dagga" (marijuana). But the telling point is made by another African who explains: "That's his Christmas."²⁵ "Christmas" for him, then, means finding a means to release all the anguish and fury and frustration which are part of his normal life. This is one of the few times that the depth of African desolation and anguish is portrayed so dramatically in Ms Gordimer's novels; and she drives the point even further on this occasion by having Cecil Rowe say, angrily:

What other country is there where you'd have a thing like that on your doorstep? What a Christmas for anybody! Nothing but a beast! How can you live with savages around you!

.....

What would make anyone choose that Christmas?²⁶

The fact that she can actually ask the final question indicates her complete inability to see a relationship between

²³ A World of Strangers, p.80.

²⁴ Ibid., p.200.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p.202.

William's behaviour and the deprivation and degradation which apartheid means for Africans. But Ms Gordimer also indicates, in the shift of Cecil Rowe's reactions from fear, to a feeling of sympathy (she makes the man a cup of coffee), to the rejection of "Nothing but a beast!" that the matter is being deliberately put away and that, where the surface reaction appears to be incomprehensibility as a product of indifference, the underlying feeling may well be refusal to seek the causes of William's behaviour for fear of having to acknowledge one's guilt.

The portrait of South African society which Nadine Gordimer gives in her novels is not a complete one. She acknowledges that there are certain types of people whom she does not portray.²⁷ Yet she does give quite a wide range of types. In The Lying Days, several different shades of liberalism are characterised. There is the passionate left-wing type, represented by Edna, who "used the same degree of intensity to bring home a point in a casual discussion as she did faced with the defense of a whole doctrine before the snap of a dozen shrewd dissenters."²⁸ Others, like Charles, do not baulk in the least at giving an African a lift, but can be as insensitive as Cecil Rowe to the causes and nature of their impoverished living. In A World of Strangers, there

²⁷ Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa," loc. cit... ²⁷.

²⁸ The Lying Days, p.146.

are the rare Africans like Steven Sithole who manage, usually by illegal and not necessarily moral means, to remain "alive" and go-getting. Others, like Sam Mofokenzazi, are more calm by temperament, and seek a midway position between their African background and the middle class values of the white world. And there are those whites who appear seldom, and always like a rude shock, and who represent what eventually becomes the unquestioned majority opinion. To them, like Miss McCann, who resigns as Toby Hood's secretary for the (unspoken) reason that he had shared his lunch in his office with Africans, and the landlady at Toby's first flat who is outraged that he should "bring kaffirs in [her] building,"²⁹ Africans have no identity as individuals; the people who are Steven and Lucky Chaputra and Betty Ntolo to Toby are simply "kaffirs" to them.

The creation of "type" characters, and the revelation of general "mentalities" in Ms Gordimer's novels not only builds towards a sort of national portrait, but reveals at times sameness beneath ostensible differences (Cecil, Toby's girl-friend, is no more able to comprehend his friendship for Steven than is Miss McCann or the landlady, Mrs Jarvis); at other times, it reveals the varieties of motivation and allegiance within ostensibly homogeneous groups (the essentially "fly-by-night" Felicity Hare, the partial liberal Charles Bessemer, the fanatical Edna Schiller, and so on.)

29 A World of Strangers, p.216.

The gradual impingement of political opinion on private life can be illustrated over the course of the four novels, and also within individual novels themselves. In A World of Strangers, for example, a good deal of time passes before Toby runs up against the protest of Mrs Jarvis; he has gone his own way for a long time before he is stopped by the police and warned that he must have a permit to enter the African townships. And his association with Steven, and later with Sam, is never shown to be operating under constant fear of interference. This is less true of the relationship between Ann Davis and Gideon Shibalo; although they are able to pursue their relationship for some time before they begin to feel hounded, there is rapidly growing fear and trepidation on the part of their friends. The places where they can carry on the normal social intercourse of friends are very limited; there are, for example, only two restaurants where they can eat together.

By the time of The Late Bourgeois World, there is no suggestion that Liz could have had dinner with Luke Fokase anywhere but in her flat. And the wariness he must display in going there, in the first place, is made abundantly clear. But perhaps the most telling way in which this novel reveals the change which has occurred in South African society is through the mood of desolation and hopelessness which emerges from Liz's reminiscences, and the deep bitterness with which the intransigence and indifference of the whites is attacked. In a near hysterical defense of Max to herself, Liz cries:

Oh we bathed and perfumed and depilated white ladies in whose wombs the sanctity of the white race is entombed! What concoction of musk and boiled petals can disguise the dirt done in the name of that sanctity?³⁰

She is furious that Max "took that dirt upon himself," and that all his mother could complain of was "her martyred respectability."³¹ And the otherwise admirable liberal notion of non-violence is made to seem the vicious preaching of deceitful nonsense in the mouths of those whites who:

like all decent people ... deplore the inhumanity of violence, and, reserving the right of constitutional action to themselves alone, commend it to others as the only decent way to achieve change - should one want such a thing.³²

The deep sarcasm of this passage is meant partly to characterise the consistently bitter tone of Liz towards uncaring and sanctimonious whites, but it is also a means to indicate the effect that repressive political legislation has wrought.

The four novels thus provide something of a running commentary, at the level of daily life, of the effects of the political laws and political actions which have shaped South African society over the period of time covered by the novels. Less and less in the novels are people able to venture freely into society to explore possibilities; less and less can personal relationships remain immune to politics. The degree of distrust which must lie behind Luke Fokase's cautious probing

³⁰ The Late Bourgeois World, p.28.

³¹ Ibid., p.29.

³² Ibid., p.32.

of his way towards asking Liz to assist him, a caution and wariness which seem ridiculous with someone whom he should regard as unquestionably on his side; that, together with Liz's uncertainty about what "life" means, what "love" means, is the surest indication of the extent to which apartheid has distorted and poisoned personal relationships, prevented the possibility of natural trust operating, made it impossible to be certain about the true nature of the most common human things.

CHAPTER 4

COMPARISONS, ALLUSIONS, CONCLUSIONS: STYLE AND TECHNIQUE IN THE FIRST FOUR NOVELS

Basically, Nadine Gordimer's style embraces two general principles, which one could call "particularising" and "generalising": the first involves a capacity for microscopic observations of human behaviour, the second the capacity to observe general features and principles objectively, and from a distance. The first is allied to a remarkable sensitivity which can capture a nuance of gesture, a shade of feeling; the second proceeds from an analytic perceptiveness which can remark the general features that denote a type of person, or pierce to the heart of a matter and reveal its essence.

Style and structure in the novels are in harmony with the subject matter and the author's purpose. Meticulous and detailed observation affirms the importance of life as it is lived daily, and generalised analytic observations confirm the need to extract truths from experience. In her first two novels, Ms Gordimer is largely concerned to pin things, with maximum precision, in a definitive phrase. If the thing to be conveyed - whether the atmosphere of a place, the description of a group of people, or the association of a series of ideas - reveals the "confusion and complicatedness" of life, she tends to use the burgeoning Jamesian sen-

tence, with its multiple clauses and qualifiers, such as the one defining the situation of liberals in South Africa.¹ To capture a precise shade of feeling, the quality of an unspoken communication, or a nuance of meaning in a general gesture, she frequently employs similes; for example, Helen Shaw's description of the awkwardness of adolescent relationships: "Sudden bursts of sympathy ignited, like matches struck by mistake,"² or Toby Hood's remark that the other passengers on the ship ignored his group's party "like children who pretend not to notice that there is a party in the next-door garden."³

In her third and fourth novels, Ms Gordimer employs a more allusive style in dealing with feeling and emotion; images have a suggestive rather than definitive quality, and there is a tendency to use symbols in place of similes. In addition, the heavy Jamesian sentence is slowly pared down and, in the fourth novel, the style is far more compact. There is a paring away as well of the sort of impressionistic detail she uses to create a place and its atmosphere.⁴

Since there are notable differences of style between the first two South African novels and the second two, it

1 See above, p.23.

2 The Lying Days, p.31.

3 A World of Strangers, p.23.

4 Compare, for example, the description of Cecil Rowe's room in A World of Strangers (pp.139-140) with that of the Headmaster's study in The Late Bourgeois World (p.14).

would be well to deal with them in pairs. As suggested before, the simile is a characteristic device of the first two novels. It is used to define and clarify. It can also be used to indicate the distorted nature of life in South Africa by suggesting the necessity for comparison with the "normal" world.⁵ The similes tend also to relate to large patterns of imagery in the novels. Thus one finds Helen Shaw likening a series of "movements and gasps and laughter" to "the commotion of swimmers rubbing themselves down,"⁶ or her dabbling in books to the sort of interest displayed by a "child playing in the ripples at the water's edge."⁷ Toby Hood, on the other hand, makes comparisons of this sort: a man moving out onto a balcony is spoken of as "looking out into the evening like a horse put out to grass after a day's carting,"⁸ and the instinctive fondling of a girl by a young man is likened to "the impersonal, momentary, instinctive recall to sex with which a dog will briefly lick, once or twice, another dog."⁹

As the examples suggest, the dominant imagery in The

⁵ An instance of this, not from the first two novels, but from Occasion for Loving, is the underlining of the fact that there are only certain limited places in Johannesburg where Ann and Gideon can dine together; it is conveyed in the clause, "just as, in other circumstances, they might have done at the smartest restaurant in town," (p.103).

⁶ The Lying Days, p.17.

⁷ Ibid., p.89.

⁸ A World of Strangers, p.80.

⁹ Ibid., p.56.

Lying Days is water imagery, linked, by an underlying notion of rhythm, to music and the blood. In A World of Strangers, it is animal. In the former, the pattern of imagery gives a unity to the novel, it is also appropriate to suggest the fluidity of Helen's state of being as she moves from early adolescence to early womanhood; in the latter, the imagery is chiefly used to define the point of view of the narrator, suggesting his detachment and disdain.

The development of the associations between water, music and blood in The Lying Days begins in the first chapter. Helen, during the course of her walk, trails her fingers along a fence, and they rise and fall over the corrugations "in an arpeggio of movement." Immediately after this music metaphor, she thinks "of water," and the paragraph goes on to establish a rhythmic association between music, water and blood.¹⁰ The passage quoted in Chapter 2, in which Helen refers to the qualities inherited from her mother as being in her "blood" connects blood and water more fully:¹¹ the "blood" from her mother "ran narrowly" and drained off the "real torrents" into "ne~~e~~ ditches." A contrast is established between the natural flow of water and its constriction in man-made channels, and that is likened to a contrast between a view of life which responds to its true flow, to the real movement of thought and feeling and experience, and the opposing one, in which the true

¹⁰ The Lying Days, p.6.

¹¹ See above, p.38.

flow is drained of its energy and freshness by being constricted, and channelled into "domestic and social habit."

Water is also associated with Helen's increasing experience of love and sex. It is at the sea that this truly begins, in her relationship with Ludi; the two of them swim almost incessantly, and she goes into the sea as if she is plunging repeatedly into the new world of emotions which is opening up for her.¹² There are also many later references to the sea and water. Helen speaks of herself as "one of those women ... who drown in sleep."¹³ More significantly, the way in which she describes her first reaction to Paul, with whom she has her most passionate, and her fullest love affair, is also in terms of water:

it gave me a kind of simple sensual pride to understand out of experience the flow of this current. To wait till it should take me up again; till I should lay myself down Ophelia-like, and be carried by it.¹⁴

This passage, together with a later one in which she speaks of the inability of Paul and herself to resist a sudden desire for sexual intercourse as being like the inability of a salmon to resist his "death leap upstream,"¹⁵ introduces a new association: a trinity of sea, sex and death is es-

¹² See particularly pp.58-59. Helen's remark, "We stayed in too long - perhaps I had been in the sea too often altogether that day," is very much like a later observation, when her relationship with Paul is drawing to a close: "We made love too often ..." (p.268).

¹³ The Lying Days, p.190.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.199.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.215.

tablished. The flow and movement of emotion is not only spontaneous, like the flow of water in its natural state, but there is an elemental force to it which drives it to a conclusion as inevitable as death; a force so powerful that it renders one oblivious to the conclusion, however final it might be.

Something of the same instinctiveness, a suggestion that instinctive impulses still play a considerable part in the lives of people, is found in the animal imagery of A World of Strangers. But the use of such imagery serves also as a comment on the narrator, Toby Hood. This is made clear in the repulsive "tick-bird" metaphor which he uses to characterise the relationship between "victims" of injustice and their "champions":

each of these victims, like an ox attended by a group of tick-birds, had his attendant champions, who, as tick-birds both batten on their ox's misery and relieve him at the same time by eating the vermin on his skin, gave the victim succour and drew from him for themselves a special kind of nourishment. Do I sound sneering? I don't mean to be.¹⁶

The whole passage, and particularly the attempt to seem ingenuous at the end, is an instance of the author's distancing of herself from her narrators. It helps, also, to fix the nature of this particular narrator; and the extent to which his use of animal imagery becomes less disparaging during the course of the book is perhaps a measure of his growth towards a less disdainful and distant attitude. There are

¹⁶ A World of Strangers, p.32.

certainly instances of the use of animal imagery where it is not disparaging: Anna Louw is spoken of as having the "neat head of a tiny bird"¹⁷ and Kit Baxter's home-making is spoken of in terms of a nesting instinct¹⁸ which, while it is not flattering, does have the quality of seeming an accurate analogy, from which the extremely antipathetic value judgement of the "tick-bird" metaphor is absent. Similarly, the description of the Alexanders' pool as being as lively as "the seal enclosure at the zoo"¹⁹ conveys sufficient frolicsomeness to make the animal allusion less than damning.

Structurally, both The Lying Days and A World of Strangers follow the pattern of "emotion recollected in tranquillity." There is a movement from passages of action and experience to passages of reflection and analysis. The structure here reflects the concern to extract truth from one's experience. It is most noticeable in the second novel, which is largely built round a series of parties. Toby moves as an observer from one group of people to another and yet another, with each group engaged in a similar social activity. After the experience of the parties, he withdraws to reflection and analysis. A good example of this is the opening of Chapter 9, where Toby considers the question of why "the life of poverty is regarded as more real than any

¹⁷ A World of Strangers, p.70.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.59.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.189.

other life." As his exploration develops, it becomes clear that he is not dealing with some unrelated speculation; his examples make obvious the fact that the question he is actually considering is the difference between life at The High House and life in the African townships. What he is, in fact, doing, then, is extracting truths from his recent experience.²⁰

This overall structure of the novels - the movement from specific experience to generalised judgements - develops out of a persistent pattern: minutely detailed observation is balanced by detached analytic generalisation. A good example of this is provided by the description of Helen's transferring all her consciousness into her dangling hand when she walks with Ludi on the beach:

All my being was concentrated in my left hand, which hung beside him as we walked. My whole body was poured into that hand as I waited for him to take it. It seemed to me that he must take it ...²¹

The particular incident related here, with its passionate expectation, the disproportionate importance placed on that dangling hand, is dealt with later in terms of a generalisation:

Nothing is more serious than this apparently laughable lack of the sense of proportion in the young. With the command of emotions like a stock of dangerous drugs suddenly to hand, there is no knowing from experience how little or how much will do; one will pitifully scald one's heart over nothing.

20 A World of Strangers, pp.157-158.

21 The Lying Days, p.50.

the nothing may be laughable, but the pain is not.²²
 Several particular incidents, several moments of disproportionate ascription of importance to things have been drawn together, and a general truth about them has been formed.

The acuteness of sensitivity and the capacity for forming general judgements come together in those observations which relate to general behaviour but touch on specific areas of feeling and awareness which usually go unremarked. One comes upon many of these observations in Nadine Gordimer's work, with the feeling of something unconsciously noted which has never been articulated before. Such, for example, is Toby's remark about a pause in a conversation: it was "one of those imperceptible moments of hanging-fire when the direction a conversation is to take is silently decided."²³ The sharpness with which Ms Gordimer observes human behaviour is again revealed in the remark about "the knowledgeable eagerness with which people love to impart information of which they themselves were ignorant until a few moments before."²⁴

As has been suggested before, the nature of these observations, and their persistent appearance, suggests the importance of daily life, of the life of the emotions and of human relationships, the range and subtlety of which they reflect and measure. But the drive which there seems to be

22 The Lying Days, p.60.

23 A World of Strangers, p.109.

24 Ibid., p.9.

to articulate so many nuances of feeling and shades of gesture in precise words suggests a desire to fix everything in a "formulating phrase," to spell out with unremitting clarity. In the third and fourth novels there is less tendency to make definitive pronouncements. Rather, the style is used to suggest, to create more blurred emotional settings. This is chiefly notable in the use of symbols and suggestive imagery.

The more allusive style is necessary to cope with the musings and reminiscences of Jessie Stilwell in Occasion for Loving. The very opening pages of the novel suggest the change in style. Jessie's "inner hum of empathy with the plants," the fact that she "had never been out of the garden," and the whole way in which the garden is related to her indicate that it has symbolic significance for her. Levels of "consciousness" are referred to, Jessie and her husband Tom are figured as "Two boats, rocking gently on the same evening water;"²⁵ and the narrative slides, without warning, from the inner world of Jessie's thoughts to the actual world of events. Over the course of pages four and five, lines of dialogue break into Jessie's musings and are only slowly allowed to assert the present and external world of the conversation she is having with her husband, eventually made clear in, "All at once, she spoke up out of herself."²⁶ Another instance of this occurs in the

²⁵ Occasion for Loving, p.5. All prior quotations in this paragraph are from page 3 of the novel.

²⁶ Ibid., p.6.

fifth chapter, where Jessie is thinking about her eldest son, Morgan; it is only when she speaks - "I should tell Morgan how he comes to have his place with us" - that we become aware of the presence of Tom, and of the fact that Jessie's reverie is not being conducted while she is alone; and it is not only Tom's uncomprehending response to her remark, but the character of that remark itself which reveals the fact that much has gone on in her mind that has not been articulated; that there is another "world" out of which something has suddenly emerged into the public, everyday world.

Jessie's movement from one "level of consciousness" to another, or from one "world" to another, is not only revealed in embodied reconstructions such as those referred to in the previous paragraph, but is made, as well, through the generalised statement - "She scrambled back to the level of half-truths on which daily life is conducted,"²⁸ or "it restored her to the surface facts of life."²⁹ These more generalised statements, as distinct from the specific instances of her movement between levels of consciousness, are another version of the double approach of "particular" and "general" discussed in relation to the first two novels. There are still generalisations of the type found in those novels - "Like all statements of a stand, reiteration tended

27 Occasion for Loving, p.71.

28 Ibid., p.6.

29 Ibid., p.34.

to make it smug and rhetorical"³⁰ - but the association of symbols with characters is new; with Jessie we associate the garden, with Ann Davis, birds.

There are generalised comments about Jessie and the garden - such as the distinction drawn between her apprehension of it and the way in which Tom "showed her the garden"³¹ - but the most potent connections are those which suggest a response but do not pin down that response in abstract terms:

She stared down at the dark and forgot herself. Under the plastered, hammered earth there was a fecund stirring in the old garden. Under stones, out of decay, sticky wings, moving jaws, feeble millipede wavings - they were all coming back to hunger and reproduction ...³²

The "stirring" in the garden is offered as a qualification of Jessie's awareness that she must "get out again," suggesting that the elemental stirring of life in the "real" garden is an analogy for the restless movements troubling the world of that other garden which is the milieu of Jessie's inner life. The half-conscious sense of identity with the primal forces of life which is intimated here returns much later in the book, when Jessie is staying at the seaside cottage of her late step-father; there she feels a sense of communion with the porpoises, an instinctive knowledge of their presence:

Living creatures came out there in the wide water

³⁰ Occasion for Loving, p.8.

³¹ See above, p.30.

³² Occasion for Loving, p.17.

and she was able to know it. She never thought about it. But there they were ... She had no means of communication with them except whatever it was that made her know when they were there ...³³

Jessie's burrowing into the past is aptly figured in terms of the movements of a mole, although the creature is never mentioned as such; but she moves "down there ... in the dark."³⁴ Ann Davis, on the other hand, is a creature of the air; bird imagery is consistently used in relation to her: her "questions and comments darted like swallows;"³⁵ she responds to Gideon with a "laugh that is as female as the special note that birds find when they want to call to their young;"³⁶ and her brief pauses between moments of frenetic activity are like the action of a "bird balancing a moment on a telephone wire."³⁷ This figuring of Ann in terms of birds finds its culmination in the "bat" metaphor, which she herself uses,³⁸ and which is also used by Tom about her.³⁹ The impulsiveness of the creature, and its blindness (in terms of normal human vision) convey perfectly the essence of Ann's nature.

If the treatment of Jessie's musings is one way of

33 Occasion for Loving, p.199.

34 Ibid., p.67.

35 Ibid., p.31.

36 Ibid., p.103.

37 Ibid., p.107.

38 Ibid., p.169.

39 Ibid., p.301.

indicating an inner life which even one's closest friends or relatives cannot properly know, the very structure of the novel is another way to develop this theme. Occasion for Loving provides several perspectives: Jessie's, Ann's, and that of the independent narrator through whom we see areas of Gideon's life unfolding. The effect of these different perspectives is to demonstrate that there are whole areas of people's lives of which others are not aware. It seems clear, for example, that Ann is quite unaware of that part of Gideon's life which is related to the African political struggle, and which we see through Gideon's association with his friend Sol.⁴⁰ We are given another look into that world when Gideon discusses, with Sandile Makhawula, the "rent campaign," a protest which some Africans are thinking of mounting.⁴¹

Two striking examples of different perspectives are provided by the juxtaposition of Chapters 6 and 7, and Chapters 16 and 17. In both cases what we have is a retracing in the second of the pair of chapters of a time span covered in the first. The former pair provides the better example, since Jessie's startled realisation at the end of Chapter 6 that Gideon and Ann are "lovers"⁴² comes against the background of their having been living together all time. Jessie's shock at the discovery is, therefore,

⁴⁰ Occasion for Loving, pp.132 ff.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp.177 ff.

⁴² Ibid., p.87.

indicative of the fact that something major has been developing all along of which she, preoccupied with her own affairs, has been quite unaware. The next chapter, Chapter 7, makes this clear by covering the same period of time, but from Ann's point of view. The contrast between the events selected in the two chapters is not only indicative of the contrast between Jessie's approach to life and Ann's, it also demonstrates the extent to which two lives, lived largely together, can still be so much apart.

The separation is revealed in the treatment of character as well. One person cannot know everything that is going on in another's mind; there are areas of a person's life which even a close friend or relative is unaware of; thus character cannot be revealed in a few well-chiselled phrases which are given when the character first appears, and hold true for that character upon each subsequent appearance, as was the case in the first two novels. The treatment of character is also affected by the concerns of the various novels; thus, in the first two, there is a fuller treatment of social portraits and a large number of characters who, like Miss McCann, are quickly and briefly depicted. When Toby Hood first sees his secretary, Miss McCann, she is described as:

one of those common little girls to whom anaemia gives a quenched look which may be mistaken for refinement, and who, appropriately, smelled of sickroom cologne.⁴³

⁴³ A World of Strangers, p.41.

Similar capsule descriptions are offered of many other characters. The same treatment is also apparent in The Lying Days where, for example, Helen provides brief sketches of several different personalities, all generally liberal in their outlook. Only a few major characters in the first two novels are given a fuller treatment, and our introduction to Anna Louw is one of the few which reveals qualities gradually, between portions of conversation.⁴⁴

In the third and fourth novels there is a fuller treatment of a smaller number of characters. This is in keeping with the fact that these two novels concentrate more on the personal effects on people's lives of the increasing encroachment of the implementation of racist politics. Even a character like Morgan, who does not occupy a central position in Occasion for Loving, is slowly developed, and shown to be, in part at least, outside Jessie's comprehension. In the treatment of his character, Nadine Gordimer in part employs a symbolic approach: Morgan's independence, and Jessie's alienation from him are symbolised by the purchase of a game for him which "you play against yourself."⁴⁵ We are later given a fuller picture of Morgan, revealing again Jessie's lack of knowledge of her son's character, and several traits of Morgan's, some of which are already known - his attempt to behave in the way he thinks is expected of him, the consequent insensitivity to the moods of others which that en-

⁴⁴ A World of Strangers, pp.70-73.

⁴⁵ Occasion for Loving, p.44.

genders.⁴⁶ The important point is that this builds on our earlier glimpses of him, and that we are given a progressive unfolding of character, rather than a definitive summary which is subsequently exemplified in a few periods of action.

The gradual revelation of character is paralleled by a similar revelation of the meaning of certain recollections or reactions, a meaning which is allowed to emerge only when the original incident or response has become little more than a dim memory. One example of this is Jessie's eventual explanation of the fear of someone coming up behind her, which was dealt with in Chapter 2.⁴⁷ Another example is the reaction which Tom has to a bright, cheerful reply of Ann's: "He flinched a little, as if he had come too quickly from the gloom of his desk into the sun."⁴⁸ His reaction here only comes to full articulation at the end of the book. Along the way, we are given no more than an occasional glimpse of Tom's judgement of Ann - "She's been very busy with culture and good works"⁴⁹ - and his remarks, like that one, work by implication. What they slowly build towards is his final judgement about Ann and Jessie's influence on her relationship with Gideon.⁵⁰ This form of revelation by accretion of occasional intimations building gradually to

⁴⁶ Occasion for Loving, pp.52-53.

⁴⁷ See above, pp.32-33.

⁴⁸ Occasion for Loving, p.27.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.43.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp.300-301.

articulation, suggests that the development of attitudes and of understanding of people is a process, similar perhaps to the "long, slow mutation of emotion" by which people's lives change.

Several ideas from Occasion for Loving carry over into The Late Bourgeois World. The way in which areas of people's lives may be hidden from those close to them is revealed in Liz's remark about her son, "This is the other Bobo, whom I will never know."⁵¹ We are also given more than one perspective on events, and there is again gradual revelation of character. But the perspectives do not come from several narrators; rather, we have the shifting perspective of a single consciousness, viewing the same people and events from different starting points. Liz reveals her former husband Max to us in a narrative which largely retraces the same ground several times, defending Max, attacking Max; at the same time, she reveals herself to us. The allusive technique of Occasion for Loving is further developed in The Late Bourgeois World. A good deal of meaning is conveyed through the tone of Liz van den Sandt's remarks, through meticulous phrasing of her statements. Although there is still use of image and symbol, one must move into the language itself to find intimations which, in the previous novel, one might have found in a symbolic reference, the association of a character with some concrete image or symbol.

The nature of Liz's telling and retelling of her life

⁵¹ The Late Bourgeois World, p.15.

with Max is indicated through the reappearance of the same details in several places in the book. Such, for example, is her reference to the fact that Max used to yell at Bobo when he was a baby,⁵² or her comment on the symbolic significance for Max of the "babble" of the "ducks".⁵³ The shifting perspective of her retelling is also conveyed through direct statements, the chief of which comes about halfway through the book:

I'm mincing words. After all these years, because Max is lying ~~dropped~~. It's like putting on a hat for a funeral, the old shabby convention that one must lie about people because they are dead. ... Max was unable to be aware of anyone's needs but his own ...⁵⁴

As the quotation makes clear, Liz is about to embark on another "version", so to speak, of Max's life. This approach seems to hark back to Helen Shaw's statement that "the truth about humans is always inaccurate, never bare;" one can set down a series of facts, of opinions, but they tend to be organised from a particular point of view; to try and give a true picture, one must work from several points of view; Liz's picture of Max's life is the fullest development in the novels of this idea.

The revelation of Liz herself comes largely from the defensive tone in which many of her statements are couched.

⁵² The Late Bourgeois World, pp.12-13. The second reference occurs on pages 58-59.

⁵³ Ibid., p.9; and again, pp.26-27.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp.51-52.

One of these is, at first glance, a comment on her lover, Graham; she has declined having dinner with him on the grounds that "there's some damned dinner party;" she then gives his reaction:

He's not a child, he's forty-six, and he took up his cigarettes and car keys without pique. But as he was leaving the flat I was the one who said ...⁵⁵

The significance of the passage lies in the questions it begs: Why does she feel the need to explain his reaction? Why should he have felt "pique" unless it was because he knew that she was not telling him the truth? The passage in fact reveals Liz: her awareness that he senses the untruth or half-truth of her "some damned dinner party." "But ... I was the one who said" further reveals her sense of guilt, by implying that some reaction should have come from him and didn't; that she then felt the need to establish some connection between them again, and that it took the form of getting him to do something for her.

This type of statement, with its obliqueness and its hidden implications, is indicative of the aura of frayed nerve-endings which pervades The Late Bourgeois World. It is revealed in Liz's defensive tone, in her tendency to rhetoric, a tendency to throw questions at the invisible listener of her conversations; the listener being South African society and specifically indifferent white South African society. "Max wasn't anybody's hero," she says at

⁵⁵ The Late Bourgeois World, p.8.

one point, but immediately after that comes the rhetorical question which is really an accusation: "and yet, who knows?" And the end of the paragraph, despite the ostensibly speculative quality given to it by the use of the subjunctive, becomes, in fact, a bitter taunt: "He may have been just the sort of hero we should expect."⁵⁶ The rhetorical question, with its implied defensiveness, appears again and again - to cover up the contradiction of Graham's being a committed liberal but "living white," to challenge the "listener" to say why certain types of relationships shouldn't be considered "love", to indicate her unwillingness to inspect her true feelings too closely, as in the passage about keeping her "hands clean," or her "toing-and-froing" about her real feelings for Luke Fokase.

The tone and phrasing, then, bespeak a subtlety of treatment which is in keeping with Liz van den Sandt's state of mind and which, through her, reveals the awful atmosphere of fear and distortion which hangs over South African society. It denotes what has been wrought by that society upon people of sensitive natures who have found its injustice intolerable but who have been thwarted at every turn in their attempts to affect it for the better.

The other side of Liz's nature, her care and considerateness, is revealed in the way in which she talks to Bobo, her attempt to buttress her son against the unpleasantness

⁵⁶ The Late Bourgeois World, p.21.

he may have to face from the other boys;⁵⁷ it is shown also in her visit to her grandmother, which she imposes on herself although she has no desire for it, and knows it is almost impossible to communicate with the old woman. Her willingness to defend Max, and to try to give a just picture of his life, despite the fact that she had obviously found much that was disagreeable in his nature, is further evidence of a certain generosity of spirit. But one must search beneath the warping of her nature to find the intelligent and sensitive person that was there, to recreate the nature which has been driven to such rhetorical outbursts as her attack on the "perfumed and depilated white ladies" who attempt to disguise "the dirt done" in the name of the "sanctity of the white race" beneath concoctions of "musk and boiled petals."⁵⁸ Like every genuine cry of outrage, which is driven to a pitch of intensity by frustration, this outburst by Liz has a melodramatic ring; it appears exaggeratedly melodramatic, but it is precisely right in the context of the novel as a measure of the extent to which people have not been genuinely touched by protest; a measure of the extent to which, in our times, unspeakable things have been done, have produced an outcry, only to be done again, so that eventually the voice of the sensitive and caring must strain for a tone in which to say anew how terrible those things are. It denotes the pitch of frus-

57 The Late Bourgeois World, p.19.

58 See above, p.56.

tration and despair which has been reached in The Late Bourgeois World.

David Daiches said of D. H. Lawrence's view of life that it became a "tortured paradigm of the psychological ills of modern civilisation, which pushed vitality into insensitive brutality and intelligence into mechanical gentility."⁵⁹ The vision of life developed in Ms Gordimer's first four novels is one which suggests something similar: the effects of racialism in South Africa are such as to drive social responsibility to violent irresponsibility, and sensitivity to neuroticism. The progressive constriction and distortion of life through the course of the novels is revealed through a shifting style which becomes more allusive, more subtle, less definitive and declarative as it moves towards the bitter truths of the fourth novel. The true quality and nature of life become increasingly revealed, not through the common channels of external action and description, but through inner reflections and through the tone of the narrator. The "true graph of experience" for Jessie Stilwell lay in her inner thoughts, in images from her past; the true quality of life in The Late Bourgeois World lies in the language, in the defensiveness, uncertainty, evasiveness and fear which it reveals.

⁵⁹ David Daiches, The Novel and the Modern World (Chicago, 1965), pp.142-143.

CHAPTER 5

THE DREAM AGAIN

The flow of life in Nadine Gordimer's South African novels contracted almost to the throttling point; from the relatively hopeful exploration of life in the first novels, there emerged eventually the bleak, bitter, agonised "mind-scape" of The Late Bourgeois World in which it seemed impossible that the dream of a life in which decent, sensitive people could live happily together, and carry on normal human relations, could ever be achieved. A Guest of Honour opens up the possibilities of life again in the context of the joyful sense of freedom which the achievement of independence brings to an African state. The first chapter of the novel, with its scenes of celebration - parades through the streets, waving flags, military bands, and the like - establishes immediately an atmosphere entirely different from that in any of the previous novels. There is pride in something achieved, and there is hope for the future. The lack of envy of the mayor of Gala, with his "splendid car manifesting his favoured position,"¹ is indicative of the pride, as the various development schemes are symbols of the hope.

A Guest of Honour is very much in the form of the traditional naturalistic novel, with its realistic detail,

¹ A Guest of Honour, p.98.

a discernible plot, and a sequence of events that is largely chronological. As in all Ms Gordimer's novels, there is a benign neglect of time which is in keeping with her attention to the daily living of life as a matter of basic importance, and which suggests as well the way in which a person fully caught up in living does not measure its passage by the stop watch or the calendar. Thus we find Bray, her hero, saying to another character, quite well on into the novel, "I've been here - yes, I suppose it's more than three months."² The hesitation, with its implication of having to calculate quickly, reveals the absence of any plotting of time in terms of days and weeks.

This benign neglect of time does not mean that there is not a general chronology of events which can be traced. The basic conflict of the novel is that of opposing solutions to the problem of how the country is to be developed: along the lines of Western-style industrialism, or according to the notion of "African socialism." The conflict is personified by Mweta, the president and leader of the ruling PIP, the country's major political party, and Edward Shinza, the doyen of independence fighters, with the former representing the industrial approach and the latter the socialist one. In the centre is Bray, through whom we are shown the conflict between the opposing sides developing from conflicting attitudes voiced hundreds of miles apart, through the clashing arguments at the PIP congress, to the eventual

² A Guest of Honour, p.113.

physical combat between the supporters of the opposing positions. The beleaguered nature of Bray's position is a paradigm for the beleaguered position of the liberal in the modern world, as much as it is a personal dilemma made painful by his close personal friendship with both Mweta and Shinza.

The achievement of independence marks the fruition of a liberal dream. It had been because of his devotion to that dream, because of his liberal principles of freedom, social equality and self-determination for colonial peoples, that Bray had been recalled from his post as District Commissioner of Gala at the instigation of his white colleagues. At the same time, he had won the admiration and friendship of the Africans whose cause he championed. One of the issues which the novel raises, then, is to what extent those same liberal principles will be honoured after independence. On the personal level, the theme of the full life is explored in large measure through Bray's relationship with Rebecca Edwards, the young Englishwoman who lives apart from her husband, and who becomes Bray's mistress.

The scope of the novel is vast. Not only does it treat in detail the question of how new African states are to be developed, it deals with all the questions associated with that problem - economic, educational, legal, moral - on the level of abstract argument as well as that of daily life. Bray is preparing a report on education at the request of Mweta. He has to consider the large questions of what kind

of education should be provided, what types of schools, and in what numbers; but we are also presented with the actual circumstances in which country schools operate, characterised by Bray's meeting with Reuben Sendwe in the second part of the novel. The impoverished condition of the village school which Sendwe runs, his own lack of formal education, and his struggles to improve it, are all depicted. So also is the complete inapplicability of the questions in the examinations which the schoolmaster has to write; prepared in England, they bear no relation whatsoever to the circumstances of his daily life; their ludicrous irrelevance and unfairness is painfully obvious in the example which Bray cites:

'Write one of the following letters: (a) to a cousin, describing your experiences on a school tour to the Continent; (b) to your father, explaining why you wish to choose a career in the navy; (c) to a friend, describing a visit to a picture gallery or a film you have enjoyed.'³

The scope of the novel is revealed also in the immense range of characters; they reflect the variety of types who make up the frequently international hodge-podge of officials, administrators, advisers found in the capitals of newly-independent African countries: the Polish agriculturalist; people like the Wentzes, who have come, hopefully, from "down South;" the "capable English don who had been headmaster of a famous public school thirty years before" and who is now an educational adviser, as is the "American

3 A Guest of Honour, p.80.

on loan from a Midwest university's African Studies programme."⁴ There are whites of the "die-hard" class, like Mrs Pilchey, still running their hotels in country towns, and lamenting the passing of the days of their unquestionable dominance over the Africans; yielding to the presence of Africans in their hotel bars only because, "It's the law."⁵ The Africans portrayed extend from Kalimo - Bray's former servant who, on learning of his return, makes an arduous month-long journey to resume his former position as a mark of personal respect and devotion to Bray - to Mweta who, as president, is shown as gradually becoming more and more distant and unapproachable. Between the extremes of old domestic servant and young president, there are officials of all grades, and characters of all types.

There are devoted officials, capable, wise and genial, like Aleke, the Provincial Officer of Gala; young and ambitious men like Ras Asahe, discontented with his superiors in the broadcasting service; warm, somewhat shy women like Joy Mweta; people like the smooth and polished Wilfrid Asoni, Mweta's secretary; and there are types observed in passing, like Joe Kabala, whom Bray's old friend, Roly Dando, the retained British Attorney-General, describes as, "A lovely champion of private enterprise, keeping the seat warm for white capital investment and raking in the director's fees."⁶

⁴ A Guest of Honour, p.101.

⁵ Ibid., p.84.

⁶ Ibid., p.43.

There are also, of course, many portraits of country people, characters who find a place in the novel mostly via Bray's association with Shinza; and there are portraits of country and city life. The effect of these many portraits is to create a picture of the country, but one that is balanced; unlike Nadine Gordimer's South African novels, the picture of society here extends over all groups, from city to country, from the lowest levels of society to the highest. The numerous characters also give the novel some of its epic texture, the feeling of a vast span of life being inspected. And the lavish treatment means that even very minor characters, like Clough, the retiring governor, have a roundness to them.

In terms of plot, the novel has likewise a complexity which none of the South African novels approaches: we do not only have the central story of the conflict personified by Mweta and Shinza, but Bray's part in that conflict, the development of Bray's relationship with Rebecca Edwards, and such other sub-plots as the tracing of the problems of the Wentz family, with the eventual estrangement of the father Hjalmar from Margot, his Jewish wife whom, at great personal risk, he had managed to save from the fate of the German concentration camps during the war, and the rebellion of their daughter Emanuelle, of whose affair with Ras Asahe the parents disapprove, but with whom Emanuelle flees the country in the end.

The inter-weaving of the various plots and sub-plots

adds to the novel's rich texture, suggesting the manifold problems - personal, social, political - which are part of the country's life. The quality of life in Africa is also conveyed by the treatment of setting; and one aspect of that life, its almost overdone richness, suggestive of an abundance in which decay and regeneration overlap and run together, is conveyed to us very early in the novel. Sitting in Roly Dando's garden, Bray notices the "coarse and florid shrubs, hibiscus with its big flowers sluttish with pollen and ants and poinsettia oozing milky secretion;"⁷ there is also a "rich stink of dead animal," in trying to find the source of which, Bray recalls the realisation to which he and his wife Olivia had come when he had been a British official in the country a decade and more before, the realisation that:

it was the smell of growth ... the process of decay and regeneration so accelerated, brought so close together that it produced the reek of death-and-life, all at once.⁸

The "feel" of Africa is given further quality when Bray ventures into the "filthy and beautiful" old section of the capital of Gala. The atmosphere of the place is evoked through imagery appealing to sight and hearing: "The minute sun-birds whirred in the coarse trumpets of flowers. Delicate wild pigeons called lullingy;" through descriptions of trees, buildings, and characteristic actions: people

⁷ A Guest of Honour, p.13.

⁸ Ibid., pp.13-14.

"strolling, pushing their bicycles," boys laughing and throwing "mango pits at each other," and "little groups of religious sects holding meetings under the trees."⁹ But there is something more which Bray senses and which he regards as being particularly African:

There was an anonymity of mutual acceptance that came to him not at all in England and hardly ever in Europe ... It wasn't losing oneself, it was finding one's presence so simply acknowledged that one forgot that outwardly one moved as a large, pink-faced Englishman, light-eyed and thick-eyebrowed behind the magnification of glasses ...¹⁰

The "anonymity of mutual acceptance" seems linked to the sense of community which is conveyed, on the same occasion, through people of all types being drawn together in a dance which, "in all its counterpoint of sound and movement was yet the sum of one beat, experienced as neither sound nor movement, the beat of a single heart in a single body."¹¹ It is this sense of community which is almost totally absent in Ms Gordimer's South African novels and which, by its absence, is another measure of the impoverishment of life in that country. It is a "sense" which, in her article on the novel in South Africa, she sees as having been lost in all industrialised countries.¹²

Of the many differences between A Guest of Honour and

⁹ A Guest of Honour, pp.95-96

¹⁰ Ibid., p.96.

¹¹ Ibid., pp.97-98.

¹² Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa," The Times Literary Supplement (August 11, 1961).

the South African novels, one of the most striking is the treatment of politics. In the former novels its effect had largely been manifested through the alterations in personal life, the increasing restrictions of choice and the driving of the politically liberal to increasingly desperate and violent measures in order to attempt to effect change. A similar movement occurs in A Guest of Honour, in as much as it appears that the struggle is going to be an armed one, and the book ends with the crushing of Shinza's rebellion by the use of military force. But political conflict on the level of theory, in ideological terms, enters into the body of the book. What is largely implicit, and never publicly revealed in the South African novels, occupies an entire section in this novel: Part Four, comprising some eighty pages, is given over to the Party Congress, and there are full-length speeches. The significance of this detailed treatment is the importance of the choice to be made, and a re-emphasis of the unhappy fact that the choice is largely political; but it is also a testament to the fact that there is some choice, that issues can be debated, that conflicting political views can be expressed in public. In the expounding of these views, Nadine Gordimer provides the fullest ideological treatment of conflicting political opinion that has ever been attempted in an African novel. She provides, therefore, a perspective on contemporary Africa which is an important complement to such works as Achebe's A Man of the People or Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not

Yet Born,¹³ with their portraits of post-independence corruption, and the corollary erosion of principles on which the new states had been founded.

For all the differences between Nadine Gordimer's South African novels and A Guest of Honour, there are many similarities. There is the same creation of place through a series of evocative and definitive images, whether a feature of vegetation, some conglomeration of manufactured objects, or characteristic gestures and actions on the part of people. The bustle of the capital at the time of independence is an example of the last of these, as the details of the old town of Gala¹⁴ illustrate the creation of atmosphere and setting through images of animals, vegetation, etc. The capital as observed by Bray, is a picture of teeming life and activity:

A young woman swung her baby onto her back, tied it firmly in her cloth, and put a small child on the luggage rack of her bicycle before wobbling off while keeping up a shouting, laughing exchange with a woman on the kerb. Bulging cartons tied with rope were loaded onto heads, bigger children took smaller ones on their backs, a group of young men on bicycles lounged and argued and the bells of other bicycles trilled impatiently at them. An advertising jingle from a transistor radio held intimately to a young man's ear as he walked, rose and tailed off through the people.¹⁵

The impression of movement, variety of movement, simultaneous actions on the part of one person, intermingling and inter-

¹³ Chinua Achebe, A Man of the People (London, 1966).
Ayí Kwei Armah, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (London, 1968).

¹⁴ See above, pp.87-88.

¹⁵ A Guest of Honour, p.39.

action between people, builds a picture of bustle and activity and communality; a city more full of humanity, of people aware of each other, than one would find in industrialised countries. It is only the last detail, the young man on his own, apparently oblivious of the people around him, which suggests the change to come - interest not in people and what they are doing, but in the radio with its commercial message.

The importance of daily life, of the private life made up of personal relationships, with all their concerns, is again affirmed in A Guest of Honour. The detail and specificity with which a particular moment of love-making between Bray and Rebecca is rendered is at once an example of the author's persistent concern for conveying small nuances and shades of feeling and detail as it is confirmation of her attitude that personal relationships and their part in our daily lives are at least as important in determining the quality of life as are larger social issues and concerns. Looking at Rebecca lying beside him in the bed, Bray:

saw every part of her body, watched the nipples turn to dark marble rolling in his fingers, found the thin, shining skin with a vein like an underground stream running beneath it ... etc.¹⁶

The passage is reminiscent of several remarks by Toby Hood, in which the intimacy of his relationship with Cecil Rowe is revealed through a similarly detailed awareness of her:

I was aware not of her laughing, talking, active

¹⁶ A Guest of Honour, p.238.

social presence, but of her silent, sentient self that was inarticulate - her hand smelling of cigarette smoke early in the morning, the exact displacement of her weight as she flopped into the car beside me.¹⁷

This manner of particularising, whether in relation to characters, as here, or the evocation of setting and atmosphere, is not only a technique for creating credibility and giving individuality to character or place but, as has been suggested, is part of the overall vision, part of the author's assertion of the importance of daily life.

Another idea^f which emerges from Bray's relationship with Rebecca Edwards is the relationship between sexual freedom and political freedom. Bray says, "I've always believed in freedom in sex. Not that I've taken much of it. But on principle."¹⁸ The "principle" is one thing; to follow it in practice is a matter of whether it would be truer to the real flow of life; truer to the meaning one makes of one's life. The "state of life"¹⁹ to which Bray comes in A Guest of Honour is one in which the practice of sexual freedom through his relationship with Rebecca is more meaningful than fidelity to the distant Olivia, just as the practice of political freedom in his support of Shinza is truer to "the end" to which he has committed himself, "against his own nature."²⁰

¹⁷ A World of Strangers, p.206.

¹⁸ A Guest of Honour, p.463.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.465.

²⁰ Ibid.

It is Hjalmar Wentz who makes the link between sexual and political freedom clearest when he refers to Wilhelm Reich and the idea of "the sexual revolution as the break with authoritarianism in the father-dominated family."²¹ This combination of the idea of sexual rebellion with social and political rebellion brings into focus Liz van den Sandt's confused inter-weaving of her desire for a relationship with Luke Fokase and her desire to give him political assistance.²²

Hjalmar's reference takes one back to Jessie's reflections at the sea-side,²³ which are linked as well to Bray's vision of life. Her reference to "real doubters" is echoed in his ideas:

it seemed to him ... that one could never hope to be free of doubt, of contradictions within, that this was the state in which one lived - the state of life itself - and no action could be free of it.²⁴

Jessie's rather irritated rejection of the "consolation-seekers" is absent here, and the calmness of tone is a mark of the more mature narrator in this novel, but also of the more mature and sober vision which informs it.

It is partly as a product of that vision that A Guest of Honour is full of life and hope, and has a scope that the South African novels did not. Yet, like them, it be-

²¹ A Guest of Honour, p.418.

²² The Late Bourgeois World, p.119.

²³ See above, p.41. She refers to Reich's The Function of the Orgasm.

²⁴ A Guest of Honour, pp.464-465.

comes a process of moving towards some final truth, a recognition of certain limitations to the possibilities for life in its fullest and freest sense. Politics again enters into the outcome, in this case directly, and the cruel irony of Bray's being killed, in effect, for those very liberal principles which had made him a "guest of honour" in the first place, is matched by the equally cruel irony of Mweta's bringing in British troops - the troops of the very colonial power so recently ousted - to put down the rebellion.

The final question which the novel poses derives from Turgenev's statement which appears as one of the epigraphs to the book: "An honourable man will end by not knowing where to live." Where can someone like Bray, determined to honour humane principles of social justice and personal liberty, be sure of finding acceptance and a full life. The South African novels made clear the hazards and impossibility of such a person and such a life's existing in that country. A Guest of Honour suggests, in the end, despite the life and hope which make up a good deal of its substance, that there is no easy place for the "Brays" of the world and that, even in seeking a place, they may have to risk their lives.

Yet there is one small "mouse of a truth"²⁵ which emerges from Bray's vision of life, and which seems to be held out as hope. After the climactic Party Conference,

²⁵ A World of Strangers, p.102.

at which Bray's recognition of Mweta's messianism causes him to swing towards Shinza, he is reflecting on "human affairs" and decides that:

Even when we are dead, what we did goes on making ... new combinations ... that's true for private history as well as the other kind.²⁶

The notion of continuity which underlies the statement is developed, when Bray expresses his final vision of life, into the idea that "when one died it would always be, in a sense an interruption;"²⁷ and, when he is dying, awkward though it seems, it is not surprising to find the utterance: "I've been interrupted ..."²⁸

The publication of "the Bray Report"²⁹ at the very end of the novel, is testimony to this belief; part of his life and his beliefs is contained in that document, and the degree of success or failure with which its ideas are implemented will make some new "combination" of the meaning of his life. Death has not ended the meaning of James Bray's life, what he did and what he believed in will go on having repercussions, and to do what one believes is right is perhaps the only certainty, then, that a "real doubter" can have.

²⁶ A Guest of Honour, p.385.

²⁷ Ibid., p.465.

²⁸ Ibid., p.469.

²⁹ Ibid., p.504.

CHAPTER 6

WITHERING INTO THE TRUTH: THE VISION OF A "ROMANTIC-REALIST"

Nadine Gordimer has acknowledged that the two writers who have influenced her most profoundly have been Forster and Camus.¹ It is possible to see many similarities in approach and ideas between herself and her "mentors". Her description of herself as someone with "no religion, no political dogma - only plenty of doubts about everything except my conviction that the colour-bar is wrong and utterly indefensible," together with her obvious concern for human relationships in all her work, bears much resemblance to Forster's statement of his position in his essay, "What I Believe."² The strain of skepticism is something she shares with both Forster and Camus, and like both of them she rejects any schematic explanation of man's situation in the world. Her sense of her role as a writer, and her artistic integrity lead her to side with Camus against Sartre in the belief that one cannot put one's writing "at the service of a cause."³

1 Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa," loc. cit.

2 Nadine Gordimer, Ibid. E. M. Forster, "What I Believe," in Two Cheers for Democracy (New York, 1951).

3 Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa." See also Germaine Bree, Albert Camus (New York, 1966). She refers to Camus's belief that "the artist, committed to freedom, cannot serve the political designs of those who 'make' history." (p.39).

There are even many details in the works of Nadine Gordimer which provide echoes of those of both Forster and Camus. Several of the attitudes of whites towards blacks in A Guest of Honour (Mrs Pilchey's, those of the customers in the Fisheagle Bar) sound little different from the opinions of such people as Callendar and the Turtons in A Passage to India. Forster's "early novels" are referred to in A World of Strangers, and Toby's reference to "girls ... whose lives are changed irrevocably after being spectator to an Italian quarrel in an Italian square,"⁴ relates to his own expectation of "the face or the street-fight" round "some corner, some day" that would do as his "destiny."⁵ A number of ideas in Camus's The Fall appear in Ms Gordimer's works: the distinction between surface and reality in Jessie's life,⁷ Max's attack on the guilt-assuaging "charity" of certain whites in The Late Bourgeois World.⁸ One even finds lines which are close to transcriptions: Clamence says, "after a certain age every man is responsible for his face,"⁹ and Ann sees Jessie as "a woman whose face was beginning to

⁴ A World of Strangers, p.15.

⁵ Ibid., p.81.

⁶ Albert Camus, The Fall, transl. Justin O'Brien (London, 1957). All references are to this edition.

⁷ See Clamence's remark on "the surface of life" as against "reality", Camus, Op. Cit., p.38.

⁸ Compare Clamence's statement, Ibid., p.85.

⁹ Ibid., p.43.

take on the shape of the thoughts and emotions she had lived through."¹⁰

But nobody, and certainly no writer of genuine ability, simply borrows mechanically from other writers and thinkers; and it seems highly unlikely that a writer will draw for inspiration on those with whom she does not feel herself already in sympathy; there must be some predisposition, some sense of intellectual, moral, and emotional kinship which establishes the sort of personal literary tradition by which Forster and Camus become Ms Gordimer's chief influences. The qualities which unite them have already been suggested. But, whatever the similarities, and however many the received insights, she has a clear view of her own purpose and place apart from them. And she does not think one should put too much stress on "influences" because she believes that one outgrows writers as one outgrows friends; and even those writers who influence one "profoundly, for ever" disappear within one and "become something new" of one's "own".¹¹

Nadine Gordimer believes that a writer's purpose is to convey to a reader "what sense" he "makes of life," and therefore to address himself to the question, "What is the life of man?"¹² But she points out that in Africa, including South Africa, a writer cannot do away with "Balzacian detail" as Nathalie Sarraute demanded, because:

¹⁰ Occasion for Loving, p.13.

¹¹ Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa," loc. cit.

¹² Ibid.

In South Africa, in Africa generally, the reader knows perilously little about himself or his feelings. We have a great deal to learn about ourselves, and the novelist, along with the poet, playwright, composer and painter, must teach us.¹³

Her South African novels attempt to do just that, to reveal the state of life in South Africa, as A Guest of Honour attempts to reveal it in a much larger setting.

Nadine Gordimer, in attempting that picture of life, is part of a fairly long tradition of writers in South Africa who have been liberal in outlook and have used their work to cast a critical eye upon South African society. The first of these writers was Olive Schreiner, whose The Story of an African Farm, published in 1883, is generally acknowledged as being the first South African novel which was worthy of critical attention. Its great value to Nadine Gordimer lies in its stimulation of intellectual curiosity - a quality she rightly says is lamentably lacking in South African society and in much of its writing - and its exploration of the meaning of life beyond the confines of "the meaning of life in South Africa."¹⁴ The next work in this tradition, which addressed itself directly to South African society and the colour question, was William Plomer's Turbott Wolfe. Published in 1925, it is widely regarded as having been prophetic in its analysis of South African society, and

¹³ Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa," loc. cit.

¹⁴ Ibid.

its identification of the problems ensuing from racial oppression and all its ramifications.

Those few critics who have addressed themselves to the subject,¹⁵ see Plomer as the forerunner of such writers as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Dan Jacobson, Peter Abrahams and David Lytton. What links them all is their concern with South African society, which almost inevitably involves a concern with racism, though their approaches differ considerably. Of all of them, Paton is the only one who has a reputation comparable to Nadine Gordimer's. Like her, he is the only major white writer (and there are hardly any non-white ones) who has remained in South Africa. His novels have a warmth and compassion which are common to author and liberal politician; but his literary production has been very limited - only two novels and a volume of short stories. There is thus no parallel to the portrait of contemporary South African society contained in the first four novels of Nadine Gordimer. No other writer has portrayed so fully the dilemma of the liberal in South Africa, nor evoked so well the agonising contraction of spirit that has become part of South African life.

But, as any writer of perception comes to gain applica-

¹⁵ General criticism of South African writing is pitifully scarce, and what there is is not often helpful. See, for example, Raymond Sands, "The South African Novel: Some Observations," English Studies in Africa (January 13, 1970), 89-104. Like many South African academics, Professor Sands seems more intent upon establishing his acquaintance with Dr Johnson, F. R. Leavis, and other distinguished figures than actually addressing himself to his subject.

bility beyond the confines of his or her country, so Nadine Gordimer, in exploring so meticulously the quality of life in South Africa, reaches out to certain basic human concerns: how to live fully in a world in which prejudice, political pressures, and restrictive social conventions channel and constrict life. In the process of exploring this general theme, she touches upon many small qualities of life through which she suggests the range and scope of human feeling and awareness; a range and scope that are in danger of being eroded by restrictive and repressive forces.

The two general qualities of Ms Gordimer's style referred to in Chapter 4, help to underline her themes, and permit her both the sensitive treatment of individuals and the general judgements about life and society which characterise much of her work. The twin prongs of style are part of her general approach, an overall attitude which combines compassion with a coldly analytic facing of "the facts". This duality was remarked upon more than a decade ago by the South African literary editor and writer, Lionel Abrahams.¹⁶ He suggested that Ms Gordimer's approach combined "two mutually contradictory attitudes to life: compassion and cynicism." "Cynicism" seems to me too limited and intellectually disparaging a term; the whole weight of Nadine Gordimer's work seems out to demonstrate that life is confused and complicated, that even the best of people have

¹⁶ Lionel Abrahams, "Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego," English Studies in Africa (September, 1960), 146-151.

the sort of inner "contradictions" that James Bray referred to, and that a writer committed to the truth must record the confusion and contradictions while rendering the good qualities in people with compassion and warmth. Ms Gordimer's own description of herself as a "romantic-realist"¹⁷ seems to me much more accurate. It encompasses the sort of idealism and hope with which most of her major characters venture into life, and it points to the cold finality with which the realities of situations are brought home to them; the sense which her characters are forced to make out of life, which usually involves a reduction of the "romantic" hopes and possibilities they had entertained, and which makes all of her novels a process of withering into the truth.

Of her five novels, the earliest seem the weakest; they have not the richness and artistry of her later works. There is, though a coherence to The Lying Days, imparted by its sustained pattern of water imagery and the consistent voice of its narrator, which is lacking in A World of Strangers. The second novel is perhaps the weakest. The largely observing eye of Toby Hood fails to draw us into the events of the novel as Helen Shaw could. The descriptive passages become cloying after a while, and, as the reviewer for the New Yorker aptly observed, there is frequently a wordiness which smothers the content.¹⁸ The mazy quality of Occasion

¹⁷ Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa," loc. cit.

¹⁸ New Yorker (November 29, 1958), 224.

for Loving is largely a product of the creation of Jessie Stilwell, but it suggests more fidelity to the idea of the confusion and complicatedness of life. Its plot is more complex, its characters fuller, and the writing richer but more disciplined than in the first novels. It was the texture of the writing, the "interpenetration" of its "images", which made Irving Malin feel that the novel deserved "rereading"¹⁹ and which led him to prefer, on the whole, Occasion for Loving to Updike's The Centaur.

With The Late Bourgeois World, Ms Gordimer's artistry as a novelist achieves a high level of maturity. The compactness of the novel in no way means that her depiction of character or setting, or the propounding of ideas about life has been reduced; rather, she has found an extraordinarily condensed means of handling them. It may be that the greater variety and scope of Occasion for Loving should place that work second among Ms Gordimer's achievements as a novelist; that her last novel is her finest is beyond question. Its unique place among African novels has already been indicated. Her consummate control is revealed in the manner in which so vast a canvas is held in proportion, in the roundness of even minor characters, and in such small details as the incidental revelation of Mrs Pilchey's departure from the country - a fact that is revealed some four hundred pages after she has

¹⁹ Irving Malin, "Occasions for Loving," Kenyon Review, Vol. XXV (1963), 348-352.

apparently passed into insignificance.²⁰ But the novel is perhaps most significant for the maturity of vision - political, social, moral - which it reveals through its tragic hero, James Bray. Bray's final vision of life is clearly the summation of all the ideas about life in South Africa, and in the modern world as a whole, which have been developing through the course of Nadine Gordimer's novels. His vision embraces both the idealism of a romantic, and the realism of a skeptic; both the hope that what is best in one will prevail, that humane ideals may come to fruition, and the realistic acknowledgement that life is full of contradictions, that its significance extends beyond a single life, and that all one can really hope to do in the end is what one believes is right, and then one leaves posterity to make what it will of that.

Nadine Gordimer's place in South African literature is unassailable. There is no other South African writer of equal distinction publishing today, and no other writer has so painstakingly analysed life in that country. Her fifth novel is a major contribution to the corpus of African writing, and the whole body of her work as a novelist must surely place her high amongst that group of writers to whom Walter Allen refers when he says that, "we live in a time

²⁰ The description of the boarded-up hotel to which they take Bray's body, particularly the mention of its aviary - A Guest of Honour, p.475 - clearly distinguishes it as Mrs Pilchey's hotel. For comparison, see the details on pp.83-85.

distinguished by a bigger concentration of talented men and women only less than the great than has ever been seen before in the history of the novel in English."²¹

²¹ Walter Allen, in his "Preface" to Contemporary Authors, (London, 1972), p.xii.

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